

EXPERIENCES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS: CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CHILDREN, PARENTS, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the early childhood education teachers experiences of continuing educational activities with children living in low SES rural districts of Turkey during COVID-19 pandemic. In order to achieve this task phone interviews were conducted with 18 pre-school teachers working in low SES districts. Interviews were audio recorded and basic qualitative analysis was utilized on transcribed data. Findings revealed that early childhood teachers make an effort to sustain their communication and educational activities with both children and parents during school closures, yet it does not sustainable during the whole semester. Teachers' main concerns were related to loss of learning outcomes during home confinement and its negative consequences in the future for low-SES children. Parents lack of ability to deal with their children at home resulted in increased use of screen time and lack of distance education opportunities for young children living in poverty additional concerns of teacher working with low-SES children.

Keywords: COVID-19, early childhood education, rural areas, low-SES children

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020 prompted governments around the world to implement measures to limit social activities and slow down the transmission of the virus. As a result, schools and universities had to suspend face-to-face instruction, and many institutions quickly transitioned to online education without adequate resources, guidance, or preparation (Sevilla & Smith, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a significant challenge for educators worldwide, requiring adaptive and transformative measures. Schools were abruptly closed, and institutions quickly transitioned to online education without adequate preparation, leaving many educators struggling to respond to emerging educational needs (Reimers, Schleicher, Saavedra & Tuominen, 2020).

In addition to disrupting the educational system, the pandemic has also impacted children's lives in several ways. One facet of this disruption is an incomplete school curriculum, and students have also been abruptly separated from their social groups (Daniel, 2020). While school closure and home confinement can be an opportunity for some children to spend more time with their families, engage in recreational activities, and watch movies, not all children will remember the coronavirus pandemic as a time of bonding. Moreover, the pandemic will have overwhelming economic consequences, particularly for low-SES families. For example, more than 22 million people in the US lost their jobs in just a month, which could easily translate to lower living standards for children (Bryant, Oo & Damian, 2020).

Home confinement has also negatively affected children's social and emotional well-being. Young children find it challenging to manage emotional and behavioral regulation under the pressure of separation from loved ones, ambiguous information about the disease, extreme changes to their daily routines, and boredom (Brooks et al, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruptions to the education sector globally, and Turkey has not been immune to its effects. The Ministry of National Education swiftly ordered all public and private schools to cease face-to-face instruction, and soon after, mandated the switch to distance education. While distance education was not suitable for the nature of preschool education, teachers were nonetheless required to continue educational activities and ensure that young children's educational opportunities were not compromised. Consequently, schools were closed for the entire spring semester.

Despite the Ministry's attempts to open schools in the fall semester of the 2020-2021 educational year, several attempts failed, and eventually, the Ministry had to close schools again due to the overwhelming pressure of over 50,000 daily cases, which prompted renewed concerns about the pandemic's impact on the education system.

In this context, this study aims to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood education, particularly in low-SES districts of Turkey. There is a gap in research on the experiences of early childhood educators in low-SES districts during the pandemic, and this study aims to fill this gap by shedding light on the challenges faced by early childhood educators and identifying strategies that can support the continuity of educational activities under such adverse circumstances. The study's findings may have implications for policymakers, educators, and families who are interested in promoting access to quality education for young children in low-SES districts during the pandemic and beyond.

Specifically, the study focuses on the experiences of early childhood educators who attempted to continue educational activities with children living in low-SES rural districts during the pandemic, where the majority of children lacked access to digital devices and the internet. Notably, our case presents similar features with children affected by earthquakes, whose conditions were even more dire than those of children living in low-SES rural districts of Turkey. Therefore, the study seeks to shed light on the challenges faced by early childhood educators and identify strategies that can support the continuity of educational activities under such adverse circumstances. More precisely this study is designed around following research questions:

- i) How early childhood education teachers describe their emotional challenge during COVID-19 pandemic?
- ii) In what ways early childhood education teachers communicate with low-SES children and parents during COVID-19?
- iii) What is the content of the distant education that these teachers provided to children?
 - How they measure the effectiveness of their distant education process?
- iv) How early childhood education teachers are going to support their educational practice for low_SES children after Covid-19 in future?

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection

Phone interviews were conducted in this study. The authors of the current paper are all teacher educators and they have network with teachers working in rural parts of Turkey with children coming from low-SES background convenient sampling was utilized in this study to reach most suitable sample. In order to select participating teachers to this study researchers first called teachers working in public schools and explained purpose and confidentiality of the current study. Then, scheduled phone interviews with volunteered participants. Table 1 presents participating educators' demographic information. Interview protocol was prepared by researchers then two experts. Once clarity of questions were confirmed and the interview protocol was finalised data collection begun with 16 main questions and six sub-questions. Table 2 presents a number of sample interview questions. All interviews audio recorded and transcribed for subsequent data analysis.

Data Analysis

Inductive understanding originated from a particular pieces of evidence, then pulling them together into a meaningful whole. In order to reach meaningful whole from a raw and disorganized data chunks researchers read all data set again and again, create domains and codes to identify salient domains, find relationship among domains, reduce data to narrow focus of analysis, search for themes across domains, select quotation to support the final report. All authors coded all data sets independently. Finally, codings were compared and a full agreement was established after discussions.

Table 1
Coding themes and categories.

Themes	Categories	Codes
Teachers' emotional challenge	Academic concerns	Concern about academic setback
	Health concerns	Concern about students' academic development during online learning
	Disconnection from students	Concern about families being able to support their children's education at home
	Uncertainty about the future of preschool education	

continued

		Concern about students completing homework assignments Fear of contracting or spreading the virus Feeling disconnected from students Missing students Uncertainty about when schools will reopen Concern about the continuation of preschool education at a distance Difficulty providing clear information to families and alleviating their concerns
Low-SES children loss of academic aquisition	Increased gap between low and high-SES children Children's academic and social gains vanish out	Reduced academic and social gains among low-SES children Widening gap between low and high-SES children's academic acquisition
Parents lack of time, resources and skills to support children learning skills	Lack of smart phone Lack of reliable internet Lack of computer Unwillingness	Low income parents Difficulty to reach mothers/fathers
Increased use of screen	To make children silent To handle house chores To keep children at home	Screen addiction Loss of interest to educational activities Parents burn out

RESULTS

Teachers' Approaches to Remote Learning During the Pandemic

All 18 teachers reported that they continued their educational process during the pandemic by sharing at-home activities with parents via WhatsApp. Of these, 12 teachers shared plans with families that prioritized academic content over recreational activities. However, this approach only lasted for 1-1.5 months at the beginning of the pandemic. Seven of these teachers noted that parental expectations influenced their educational programs during this time.

Conversely, 7 out of 18 teachers emphasized the importance of children's well-being and prioritized play-based activities that fostered happiness and comfort over academic expectations. The teachers used various sources, such as books and the internet, to find these activities. All teachers used WhatsApp as their primary tool to share activities and collaborate with colleagues during the remote learning process.

Most teachers (12 out of 18) reported that parents had no difficulty implementing the activities recommended to them. These activities were enjoyable and required easily accessible materials found at home.

Emotional Challenge

Teachers' Emotional Challenge

All 18 teachers expressed their unease and worry when schools closed due to the pandemic. Of these, 12 teachers were concerned about the potential academic setback that their students might face. 10 teachers expressed health-related concerns, fearing the risk of contracting or spreading the virus. Emotionally, 14 teachers felt disconnected from their students and missed them dearly. Only 2 out of 9 teachers believed that remote learning was not suitable for the preschool education level.

"I felt uneasy when the schools first closed. The parents were in panic and trying to get information from me. I didn't know what the answer. I had concerns about not properly informing parents due to the uncertainty of the pandemic process." (P2)

"I was worried. How long this process will take was uncertain. I thought what the children would do in this process in terms of developing their academic skills. I was worried that the families would be enough for the students in terms of education. I was particularly worried about whether families could do the homework I gave to their children." (P3)

"I did not anticipate that the school closure period would take that long. I thought we would be back at any moment. After it became clear that the process would take a long time, I tried to send activities to our families within the scope of distance education. I was also very concerned that the virus could be transmitted to anyone in this process." (P9)

"The uncertainty about how long the pandemic will last puts me in great trouble. In particular, it saddens me not to be able to give clear information to families' questions and to alleviate their concerns. My concerns about the continuation of preschool education at a distance are also quite intense." (P4)

Children's Emotional Challenge

All 18 participants agreed that the current pandemic has negatively impacted children's development. Of these, 11 participants identified social development as the most crucial area affected, while 8 participants emphasized the negative impact on children's psychological development, including fear, anxiety, and isolation. Additionally, 8 participants highlighted the deficiencies related to children's physical development.

"During this period, the children could not engage in physical activity. They stayed away from their peers. They were also affected very negatively

psychologically. They were faced with instructions like put on your mask, don't talk to anyone, don't touch there. They are really bored. They could not effectively improve their cognitive, motor, and social development. They improved their self-care skills, but this also started developing some obsessions in children regarding hygiene.” (P1)

12 teachers highlighted the negative impact of the pandemic on parent-child relationships. The reasons for this included parental fatigue, psychological wear/fear, and tension due to having to care for their children all day long. As a result, communication between parents and children was disrupted, leading to an unhealthy situation. Three of these teachers also noted that the general atmosphere at home during the pandemic affected parent-child interaction. Furthermore, one teacher raised concerns about the possibility of children being exposed to violence, particularly in families with a history of domestic violence.

Six out of 18 teachers held a positive view, stating that the pandemic period allowed children to spend more time with their parents, which strengthened the parent-child relationship. These teachers argued that the lockdown situation provided working parents, in particular, with an opportunity to spend more quality time with their children than usual. As a result, they believed that parents had the chance to observe and understand their children more closely, which led to increased happiness for both parents and children.

“Everyone was very nervous during this period. The psychology of the children was also negatively affected. Especially mothers had a hard time in this process. Sometimes they wanted to call me and shout 'Help me, save me'. I haven't observed that their communication with their children is always good.” (P3)

“During this process, both parents and children were tired of being together all the time. They were constantly arguing. The children had forgotten the courtesy rules. They shouted at their families and insisted that I would always get what they wanted.” (P6)

Teachers' Views about the Positive and Negative Aspects of the COVID-19 Pandemic Process for Children

Positive Aspects of the COVID-19 Pandemic Process for Children

Out of 18 teachers, 5 mentioned that the pandemic process had a positive contribution to children. These teachers emphasized that families had the opportunity to spend quality time with their children and observe them more closely. One teacher highlighted that this effective time with children supports their cognitive development, while another teacher stated that the parent-child bond strengthened. Additionally, 5 teachers pointed out that the pandemic process enhanced children's self-care skills, with a particular emphasis on hygiene awareness.

“The only positive side of this process is that the parents have the opportunity to get to know the child. The development in the children developed according to the parents' emotions rather than the children. Cognitively developed. Self-care has improved.” (P5)

“Normally the kids would say that their parents can't read them like me. In this context, I have seen families develop themselves in this process. The bonds of families with their children have been strengthened. They learned that when they stay at home, they can spend quality time without going out.”

(P2)

“The only positive thing is that children have improved self-care skills, in particular on hygiene issues. When school starts, all of them will wash without having to say wash their hands after toilet.” (P4)

Negative Aspects of the COVID-19 Pandemic Process for Children

When asked to evaluate the pandemic's impact on children, only one out of 18 teachers believed that it negatively affected their social development, specifically their language skills. However, nine teachers noted an increase in children's screen time, which they believed could lead to addiction. Three teachers mentioned changes in eating and sleeping habits, while two teachers highlighted a lack of socialization opportunities and limited exposure to social norms. Additionally, nine teachers expressed concerns about evaluating homework, making it challenging to assess children's developmental progress. Finally, a few teachers (3 out of 18) reported that children were bored due to limited opportunities for physical activity and play at home.

Parent-teacher Communication during COVID-19 Pandemic

The participants' opinions on parent-teacher communication during the pandemic process can be categorized into three groups: (a) increased communication, (b) decreased communication, and (c) no change.

9 out of 18 teachers noted a significant reduction in communication with parents during the pandemic, compared to normal times when communication was more frequent. Although parents were initially more open to communication and guidance on effective ways to spend time with their children, the teachers observed a decline in parental engagement and expectations as the pandemic progressed.

In contrast, a cohort of teachers (7 out of 18) reported that their communication with parents increased during the pandemic compared to normal times, leading to improved and closer relationships. Additionally, 2 teachers noted that the pandemic had no effect on their relationship with parents and that they were able to maintain healthy communication throughout the process.

“I was in constant communication with parents during the pandemic process. Of course, we were meeting more with parents during normal school time.”

(P1)

“During this process, we only talked to the parents via whats app. Parents who came to the school every day used to send a few messages a day during the pandemic process. Teacher-parent relationship has decreased. Our communication was more frequent in the early days of the pandemic, but it has declined over time.” (P4)

“Our communication with parents has improved during the pandemic process. We could talk in more detail about the development and learning of children. We became more sincere. There were children calling everyday in the morning.” (P5)

Parents' Sharing Experiences with Their Children during Pandemic

Teachers reported that parents shared their children's pandemic experiences with them via WhatsApp photos, audio recordings or videos. These teachers noted that families typically used WhatsApp to share photos, videos, or voice recordings. In contrast, some teachers (7 out of 18) observed low parent engagement with sharing their experiences, citing parents' other household responsibilities and childcare needs as possible reasons.

“During this process, parents shared what they did at home with their children via whats app. For example, they would learn poetry and make a video of it and surprise me. Or they would take a video of how to play games with his father and send it to the parent group. They were posting on our whatsapp as voice recording, photo and video.” (P2)

Parents' Spending Time with Their Children during COVID-19

Half of the teachers (9 out of 18) believed that parents needed guidance on how to effectively spend time with their children during the pandemic. Of these 9 teachers, 6 reported that parents had academic concerns and expected academic support for their children to prevent them from falling behind. Meanwhile, 4 teachers reported that parents only expected play or activity suggestions to spend quality time with their children. This pertains to the teachers' evaluation of the pandemic process in terms of their professional life.

When asked to evaluate the pandemic process in terms of their professional lives, teachers' opinions varied. Among the 18 teachers interviewed, 16 mentioned both positive and negative aspects. 11 teachers spoke positively about the pandemic process and its impact on their professional development. They highlighted participating in various distance education opportunities that contributed to their personal and professional growth. Three teachers mentioned the importance of 21st century skills and how the pandemic highlighted the need for problem-solving, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Two teachers noted that the pandemic improved their ability to empathize with parents who take on teaching roles. Another two teachers spoke about gaining a positive outlook and learning the importance of having contingency plans for unexpected events.

About half of the teachers (8 out of 18) expressed that the pandemic process had no positive aspects in terms of their professional lives. Among these teachers, 7 mentioned that the process caused psychological exhaustion, anxiety due to the disruption of their usual routine

and uncertainty. 6 out of the 18 teachers felt that they regressed professionally and were not adequately prepared to provide effective distance education. These teachers reported that they were unable to teach certain subjects and concepts and felt sad about it. Moreover, 3 out of the 6 teachers pointed out the inequality that emerged during the pandemic process due to the lack of internet access in some households and the varying socio-economic and education levels of parents.

When asked about their participation in remote training programs to improve their professional skills during the pandemic, over half of the teachers (10 out of 18) expressed interest in participating but were unable to find time to do so. Participants cited their home-based responsibilities, such as child care and housework, as the primary reason for their inability to attend these trainings.

“I think I evaluate this process positively in terms of my professional development. I thought about what I could do to help children get through this process and made researches.” (P2)

“During this period, I had the opportunity to develop myself professionally. I had the chance to see different educational practices around the world. I saw what the priority issues were. During this period, I watched discussions about how the curriculum can be implemented. Certainly, it is being discussed that curricula should be updated to focus more on social and emotional learning in all countries.” (P7)

“Being away from school affected me a lot. Staying home hit me badly as I was used to working. I felt a little out of business. It was also difficult to break the usual order. Psychologically, this process was exhausting me. I wanted to do a lot for the second term but always halfway.” (P1)

“My psychology is broken during this process. Since I have two children at home, I could not even read a book. I couldn't add anything to myself. I was tired of the uncertainty of the process.” (P3)

“The most downside of this process is that we are not unprepared. We should always have an emergency plan so we can run the process more professionally. For example, the families were very unconscious about how to use the house as a school.” (P7)

“I did not have the opportunity to participate in this type of training. I could not attend because I have children in a home environment. I wanted so much, but it didn't work.” (P4)

Teachers' Needs during Pandemic Process

Nearly half of the teachers (8 out of 18) expressed a need for psychological support to continue their profession effectively during the pandemic process. These concerns were related to the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and the future of distance preschool education. Some of the teachers (4 out of 18) reported difficulties in finding different activities for families to engage in with their children at home, and they required support in this regard. Furthermore, 5

out of 18 teachers stated that they encountered challenges in delivering educational activities due to technological insufficiencies during the pandemic process, such as limited access to the internet. Only one teacher reported not requiring any assistance during this process and successfully managed to conduct activities for children and herself.

The reflection of the Possibility of Continuing the Pandemic Process in Pre-School Education

All of the 18 participating teachers stated that preschool education would be negatively affected if the pandemic process continues. The majority of the teachers (17 out of 18) expressed that applying health precautions such as wearing masks and maintaining social distancing would be difficult with preschool children. Among these teachers, 8 mentioned the issue of crowded classrooms, while 7 emphasized the importance of physical contact with children to prevent them from feeling alone. Additionally, 3 teachers mentioned the insufficiency of teachers in technology and informatics for distance education, and only 1 teacher believed that distance education could be effectively implemented in preschool education.

“If this process continues, I think pre-school education will not be efficient. Since our age group is small, it is impossible to maintain social distance at school and ask children to wear masks while playing games all day. Sometimes there are children who want to be on my lap all day long. Children often need me to be in close contact with them.” (P1)

Teachers' Views on New Arrangements in Preschool Education during the Normalization Process after Pandemic

When asked about potential changes or innovations to their education programs during the normalization process after the pandemic, the majority of teachers (12 out of 18) expressed a preference for conducting classes primarily outdoors to protect the health of both themselves and their students. However, 4 of these teachers noted potential challenges with using their school grounds, as their kindergartens are located within primary schools with limited space for young children's activities. Additionally, half of the teachers (9 out of 18) indicated that they would place greater emphasis on self-care and hygiene in the school environment after the pandemic compared to before.

“I adopt the learning by doing approach. Morning events are no longer my priority. I was saying you would feel cold when the kids begged me to go out. But now I will take more care of children playing in the schoolyard.” (P5)

Teachers' Opinions about the Health Precautions Taken by Their Institutions after Pandemic

When asked about preparations for the health of children in their institutions after the pandemic, the majority of teachers (16 out of 18) reported that their schools had taken certain health precautions, particularly in relation to hygiene. These included disinfecting the school, placing disinfectants in various areas, and providing masks for everyone. However, three of these teachers mentioned that their schools would be providing training to increase awareness

of hygiene issues among cleaning staff, teachers, and parents. Two of the teachers also reported that extra classrooms would be opened to ensure a low number of children per classroom. Two out of 18 teachers stated that there had been no preparation for hygiene measures in their schools, but they expected the administration to comply with the hygiene rules set out by the Ministry of Education.

“Everything in the school was disinfected and prepared for the new term. The foot disinfectant machine was bought for all corridors and classrooms. There will be rules such as mask social distance for everyone.” (P1)

Preparations of School Management to Compensate for Children's Developmental and Learning Deficiencies

All 18 teachers were asked if they have taken any action to compensate for the shortcomings of childhood development and learning during the pandemic, and they all reported that there has been no preparation yet. If any actions are planned, they will be discussed in the upcoming seminars starting in August.

Six out of 18 teachers expressed their belief that compensation for childhood development and learning would not be necessary since different groups of children are registered each year in early childhood education. However, a few teachers (4 out of 18) reported that any compensation would only be functional for new enrolled children, and it would only aim to reduce the academic concerns of the parents about their children's learning.

“We do not have any preparations yet to make up for the shortcomings of the children regarding the subject and concepts. Because every year new children are enrolled in pre-school education. This is impossible as children in my classroom will start primary school next year.” (P2)

Teachers' Comfort in Providing Education to the Parents through Distance Education and to Use the Equipment for Using Technology

When asked if they would feel comfortable providing education to parents or colleagues during distance learning, the majority of teachers (16 out of 18) indicated that they have sufficient technological equipment and would feel comfortable doing so. Some of these teachers (8 out of 18) even reported that they have already provided parent trainings and would have no issues adapting them to the distance learning platform. However, 5 out of these 16 teachers mentioned that their ability to do so would depend on the internet access of both themselves and the parents. Only 2 out of 18 teachers reported an inability to effectively use technology for distance education with parents.

“I do not think I will have any difficulties in this regard, as I have previously provided various trainings to families. The only difference is that the training will take place not face-to-face but by distance education.” (P7)

“The most downside of this process is that we are not unprepared. We should always have an emergency plan so we can run the process more professionally.”

For example, the families were very unconscious about how to use the house as a school.” (P7)

“The only positive side of this process is that the parents have the opportunity to get to know the child. The development in the children developed according to the parents' emotions rather than the children. Cognitively developed. Self-care has improved.” (P5)

When asked about their plans for carrying out preschool education if the pandemic continues, half of the teachers (n=4) reported having solutions or roadmaps, while the other half (n=4) stated that they have not given much thought to it. The solutions proposed by these teachers were primarily focused on professional development in online education (n=4). They acknowledged their lack of experience and preparation for teaching young children remotely and expressed a desire to improve themselves to better manage distance learning and provide high-quality education in the future.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examines the challenges faced by early childhood education teachers in continuing educational activities with children living in low SES rural districts of Turkey and how the pandemic affected their teaching experience. Additionally, the section could provide more information on training or support programs that could help teachers to use online teaching platforms more effectively. The results indicated that the type and degree of distance education challenges varied among teachers. The main challenge experienced by teachers was emotional. Uncertainty, panic, and fear were challenges felt not only by teachers but by the entire society. Nobody knew how long school closures would last or how distance education would be conducted. In this study, like all people, teachers' concerns were mainly focused on health issues. The findings are consistent with previous studies showing that early childhood teachers struggle with several additional stressors while providing education and care services for young children (Eadie et al., 2021). When all the people confined their home due to highly contagious nature of this disease online education emerged as an only option.

Online learning has been a great option for maintaining the educational process and helping teachers to carry out teaching activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it has been found to be least applicable for preschool education due to various reasons, including the availability of facilities, network, and internet usage (Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020). The lack of reliable internet access, computers, tablets, or smartphones has been a major issue in rural parts of Turkey. Although the general internet usage in Turkey is reported to be around 92% of households having access to broadband internet (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2021), it can be inferred that internet usage in low SES rural districts may be lower. With regard to this result, the government could consider implementing programs or forming partnerships with private sector companies to provide affordable and reliable internet access (Garcia-Escribano, 2020). Additionally, initiatives could be introduced to provide teachers and families with the necessary equipment and training to effectively use online teaching platforms.

Moreover, the results of the current study have indicated that the school closure during teacher strikes or summer holidays negatively influenced children's literacy skills and test scores (Cooper et al., 1996). Parallel to this, Frenette (2008) found that having one year less school experience resulted in a 6% lower score in reading, a 5.9% lower score in math, and a

4% lower score in science. Relatively recent studies conducted by Johnson (2011), Baker (2013), and Davies and Aurini (2013) indicated that school closures during teacher strikes or summer holidays negatively influence children's literacy skills and test scores. A study by Engzell et al., (2021) found that students made little or no progress while learning from home during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning loss was most pronounced among students from disadvantaged homes.

The majority of the participating teachers revealed that they continued to share enjoyable, developmentally appropriate, and easy-to-do activities with parents during the school closure time, and parents were willing to complete all activities they were sent home at the beginning of the school closure. Supporting this result, McClain et al. (2021) found that while the majority of parents whose children had some online instruction during pandemic reported that online instruction had gone well and that they had an easy experience helping their children use technology and the internet for online instruction. However, with the extension of the quarantine time, this motivation decreased among parents, and parents tried to reach educators in order to get emotional support and suggestions for spending quality time. Thus, children's developmental and educational needs were not met in a systematic way during the pandemic. These challenges highlight the importance of developing effective strategies for providing quality education to all children, particularly those in rural areas, during a pandemic or other crises. The teachers who participated in the study indicated that they require additional professional development to improve their proficiency in using online teaching platforms. Successful implementation of online teaching is heavily dependent on the technological abilities of both the teachers and the children to access online programs and use computers, and thus prerequisite equipment and skills are necessary (Kim, 2020). However, online learning may not be suitable for young children as it may not provide the necessary opportunities for interaction and hands-on activities, which are crucial for their learning, compared to adult learners. Developing countries, in particular, require support to establish effective online education, which can increase institutional capacities and resources to provide alternative learning methods for disadvantaged children (Reimers et al., 2020).

When the teachers who participated in the study were asked if they had received any preparation for resuming face-to-face education, none of them reported any preparation related to psychological support programs for children or teachers. Instead, their concerns were focused on health precautions and social distancing-related issues. Participating teachers expressed worry about whether they would be able to apply hygiene and health precautions, such as wearing masks and complying with social distancing rules, to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus among children when schools reopen. Despite studies suggesting that children are not severely affected by COVID-19 and the spread of the virus in schools is not high, majority of teachers still had concerns about implementing health precautions (Ludvigsson, 2020; Viner et al., 2020).

When questioned about how parents provided feedback on the activities recommended for their children, the majority of teachers reported that families shared photos and videos of their children participating in the activities via WhatsApp. Additionally, teachers noted that parents shared the products or some parts of the activity process with them. However, they also mentioned that the frequency and intensity of these shares decreased as the pandemic continued and people adjusted to living with it, even though these rates were much higher when the pandemic first started.

Teacher interviews conducted during the study indicated that early childhood educators working in rural areas of Turkey are not ready for distance education with young children. There are many different reasons such as lack of instrumental opportunities of low-SES families, lack of knowledge among teachers related to using online learning platforms and children's lack of capacity to independently using technological devices that are required for distance learning. Although many of these issues are difficult for all early childhood educators, this study indicated that aforementioned issues are more difficult to deal with when teachers are working with children from low-SES groups in Turkey. Therefore, main implication of this study might be the fact that teacher candidates are not strongly prepared for working with difficult conditions. Majority of teachers had to use one or two applications to reach families and they had difficulties to produce appropriate solutions to reach low-SES children. So this study indicated a strong need to increase the quality of teacher education processes in the country to qualified teachers with using technological devices and applications, creating optional solutions under the circumstances of lack of instrumental resources. Additionally, after a while, this study indicated that teachers also needed some social and emotional support but the system is not strong to support them socially, emotionally and professionally. Therefore, again this study highlighted the need for stronger teacher support system. This support might be provided through in-service trainings which are face-to-face or online.

Another implication that this study provided is the fact that schools do not have any emergency programs particularly for the early childhood education level and also support programs. This made all teachers panic and they reported feeling ineffective and worried about the next step. It is clear that there is needs for an emergency plan for early childhood education system for unexpected situations like COVID-19 or earthquake and teachers and schools should be strengthen to be more effective.

Since this study is limited to teachers working in low-SES regions, we still do not know to what extend other teachers in the country experienced similar problems. Therefore, research might be conducted to compare difficulties that teachers experience during COVID-19 in both rural and urban areas. This would indicate better the gap between low-SES and middle or high-SES groups.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the challenges faced by early childhood education teachers in low SES rural districts of Turkey during the pandemic, particularly in regards to distance education. The results show that teachers experienced emotional challenges due to uncertainty and fear about the situation, and the lack of internet access and equipment in rural areas hindered the implementation of online teaching. While teachers continued to provide activities for children during school closures, the motivation to complete them decreased as time went on. The teachers expressed a need for professional development to improve their online teaching abilities, but also had concerns about implementing health precautions when schools reopen. Besides, setting routines, establishing responsive and caring relationship, giving age-appropriate information, keeping children both physically and mentally busy prevent them worrying about pandemic. Finally, the frequency and intensity of parents sharing feedback on their children's activities decreased as the pandemic continued. Overall, this study highlights the need for continued support and resources for early childhood education teachers in rural areas during times of crisis.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author was responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings, and preparation of the manuscript.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

No generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the findings, or writing of this manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

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