Turkish Teachers' Response to the COVID-19 Crisis: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

The present study examined teachers' perceptions of changes in their professional lives brought about by distance education during the COVID-19 outbreak. It was also aimed to explore how this particular global crisis and unprecedented times of education have affected teachers' motivation and their perceptions of the teaching profession. Twenty-two teachers working at different levels and types of K–12 schools in different cities in Turkey were interviewed by utilizing a phenomenological qualitative inquiry method. Our analysis showed that the obligatory transition to distance education created new opportunities and challenges for both teachers and students. While the teachers had emotional exhaustion, stress, and professional difficulties; distance education helped them develop new skills to better integrate educational technologies into classroom teaching. The findings also indicated that the COVID-19 crisis reinforced deep-rooted inequities in the Turkish education context. This study offers several implications for policymakers and educators to plan educational recovery from COVID-19.

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the entire education sector has faced nationwide closures and experienced a global switch to distance education (UNESCO, 2020a; Wong & Tang, 2021). Nationwide school closures caused by the outbreak and interruption of face-to-face education have impacted the education of 1.6 billion students worldwide, which corresponds to approximately half of the student population at all levels of education (UNESCO, 2020b; UNICEF, 2020). In an attempt to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed in Turkey, as in many countries worldwide. In Turkey, school closures impacted 25 million students and 1 million teachers (UNESCO, 2020c). During the COVID-19 outbreak, distance education was implemented at all schools at all levels throughout the country to meet the urgent need for education. The Ministry of National Education decided that the distance education system would combine the use of online platforms and TV broadcasts. With the transition to distance education, teachers faced significant difficulties in adapting to online teaching and supporting their students' development without communicating face-to-face with them (Çakın & Akyavuz, 2020).

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Many countries in Europe have faced similar challenges during the pandemic due to the unexpected transition to distance education (Alves, Lopes, & Precioso, 2021; Bergdahl & Nouri, 2020; Di Pietro, Biagi, Costa, Karpiński, & Mazza, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Giovannella, Passarelli, & Persico, 2020; König, Jäger-Biela, & Glutsch, 2020). The outcomes of different studies indicated that teachers' perceptions of the value and the future of their profession changed during the COVID-19 outbreak, and their professional life has been affected by the crisis in many different ways (Alves et al., 2021; Asbury & Kim, 2020; Bakioğlu & Çevik, 2020; Giovannella et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020). The present paper examines Turkish teachers' professional experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak. We also aimed to explore how this particular global crisis and unprecedented times of education had affected teachers' perceptions of the teaching profession. The following questions guided the study:

1. How do the teachers describe being a teacher in Turkey during the Covid-19 outbreak?

2. What are the experiences of teachers regarding the changes in their professional lives during the COVID-19 outbreak?

3. How did the COVID-19 outbreak change teachers' perceptions of the teaching profession?

    a. What factors affected teachers' perceptions of the teaching profession during the outbreak?

COVID-19 and Schooling in Turkey

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected every country, community, and family. The crisis is not only a health crisis but also an economic and educational one. In Turkey, preschools were partially closed for 70 days or more, primary schools were fully closed for more than 120 days, middle schools were fully closed for more than 130 days, and high schools were fully closed for more than 150 days between January 2020 and May 2021 (OECD, 2021). As a quick response to the pandemic, a week after the closure in March 2020, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) established three public TV channels broadcasting educational content for K–12 students. With these channels, the MoNE provided 10,375 course videos and 1021 extracurricular activity videos (MoNE, 2021b).

The MoNE already had a well-established online learning platform, the Education Information Network (EBA), which was a tool supporting face-to-face education for the whole K–12 system via its vast digital library for both teachers and students. This platform was established in 2012 as a part of a nationwide project to provide equal opportunities in education and improve technology in schools (MoNE, 2021a). The project aimed to provide VPN-broadband Internet access for every school, interactive board and wired/wireless Internet access for every classroom, EBA applications, shared course notes, a cloud account and digital identity for every teacher, homework sharing, and individual learning materials for every student (MoNE, 2021b). When the pandemic broke out, new needs arose. With the outbreak, the MoNE integrated new functionalities into EBA. For instance, teachers have the opportunity to create live classrooms in EBA. Now it has a capacity of nearly 1 million live classrooms each day. Another technology integrated into EBA was Artificial Intelligence (AI). The EBA Academic Support system is specifically designed for the 11th and 12th grades, backed by smart suggestions from the AI infrastructure. This includes suggesting studying strategies for university entrance exams, creating university preference lists, and personalized roadmaps. All the materials in EBA are compatible with smartphones. This is useful mainly for families who do not have enough computers for each child at home. Mobile phone operators in Turkey also provided their subscribers with 8 GB data packages free of charge to be used only to access EBA (MoNE, 2021c).

High-quality, accessible, and inclusive education is always the top priority for education specialists, but it has gained greater importance during the COVID-19 crisis. Unfortunately, it has widened the inequalities the world faces. Like all other countries, Turkey has faced the risk of an increase in learning gaps stemming from difficulties to access to online learning. Although the MoNE has already started hybrid learning, which includes face-to-face and distance learning together, some additional measures have been taken to ensure continuity of education for disadvantaged groups like refugees under temporary protection, students with disabilities, and students from low-income

families. For instance, like Turkish students, refugee children can benefit from the EBA platform. Many educational materials on learning Turkish have been uploaded to the platform, and online lessons have been conducted on this platform for refugee children. The MoNE's TV channels are also broadcasting Turkish language courses. Furthermore, hundreds of educational videos for students with learning disabilities and visual and hearing impairments have been prepared and uploaded to EBA. TV broadcasts have also been designed to support students with disabilities. Moreover, more than 15 thousand online learning support centers and 185 support vehicles were established for students unable to access distance and online education without assistance. These support centers are a kind of computer classroom with Internet access in schools and on the premises of other educational institutions serving anyone who needs access. Finally, to promote access to online learning, over 600 thousand tablets with a 25 GB Internet quota were delivered to low socioeconomic status students (MoNE, 2021c).

Lastly, to support the teachers involved in distance and remote learning, the MoNE offered some in-service training courses, including Digital Transformation Training in Distance Education, Designing the Digital Instructional Material with Web 2.0 Tools, and Developing Design and Management Skills in the Distance Education Process (MoNE, 2021d). However, the number of participants in these training courses showed that not all teachers were trained during the COVID-19 pandemic by the MoNE.

Research on Teaching during the COVID-19 Outbreak

Several studies have examined the professional experiences of teachers during the outbreak. Bakioğlu and Çevik (2020) examined the perceptions of science teachers about teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their conclusions indicated that most of the teachers were anxious about not being able to teach face-to-face during this period. They attributed their anxiety to a number of factors, such as lack of information, unhappiness, feeling inadequate regarding distance education, and inability to reach the student. Moreover, they stated that the pandemic also negatively affected their professional satisfaction, and the main reason for their dissatisfaction was the feeling of inadequacy. However, it was also revealed that the professional development of most of the teachers was positively affected, and they developed new skills to better integrate educational technologies into their professional lives.

In Kaden (2020)'s research, most of the teachers expressed their anxiety and concerns about distance education due to lack of knowledge, feeling inadequate, and failure to reach the students. In another study, it was found that teachers' perception of well-being was negatively influenced, and they developed concerns about the future of their profession after the COVID-19 outbreak (Alves et al., 2021). According to Kaden (2020), school closure was hard on both students and teachers as they both struggled to develop new skills to cope up with the crisis and suffered from social isolation. Teachers had to learn new technologies to adapt their lesson plans and find new ways to communicate with their students. However, most of the Canadian teachers in Sokal, Eblie Trudel, and Babb (2020)'s research thought that this new type of delivery of education reproduced inequities. School closures widened the digital divide and the gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Children from low-income families were unable to get sufficient support from their working parents, which added to the difficulties stemming from their conditions at home (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020; Kaden, 2020). In this sense, Kaden (2020) suggested that in order not to deepen inequality and social divides, it is necessary to plan online education carefully in line with the principles of individualized instruction.

The literature also showed that teachers' perceptions of the value and the future of their profession changed during the pandemic. Asbury and Kim (2020) interviewed 24 teachers in England regarding their perceptions of the value given to their profession during the pandemic. Their reflective thematic analysis showed that the teachers were uncomfortable with the media's negative depiction of their profession and the consequences of this in the public sphere. However, the teachers stated that they felt appreciated more by the students and parents. Kaden (2020) examined the changes in the professional life of a teacher working at a secondary school in rural Alaska, USA, during the COVID-19

school closure. Alaska had high rates of minority and special needs students with high poverty rates and low levels of academic achievement. The results of that research showed that the teacher's workload increased during the outbreak, and his/her professional life had been affected by the crisis in many different ways. Unpleasant work-related emotions could be related to the long duration of the pandemic, which leads teachers to feel exhausted due to the new challenges of their profession and lose confidence in performing their job (Burić & Kim, 2020). While online education was accepted as inevitable by some teachers (Sokal et al., 2020), others thought that online education was an unnecessary burden for teachers (Quezada, Talbot, & Quezada-Parker, 2020).

The transition to distance education caused most teachers to feel less effective and decreased their efficacy (Sokal et al., 2020). Even highly experienced teachers felt uncomfortable and transformed into novice teachers due to the radical changes in the education system (Marshall, Shannon, & Love, 2020). Giovannella et al. (2020) conducted a study with 336 teachers in Italy to examine their teaching preferences in the future and found that 66% of the teachers would prefer face-to-face education, 32% blended teaching, and only 2% online teaching in the future. Teachers' preferences were associated with their instructional knowledge, skills, and habits. Aliyyah et al. (2020)'s study demonstrated the challenges Russian teachers faced during distance education; teachers had difficulty in assessing their students' cognitive, psychomotor, and affective development. Furthermore, they also had trouble facilitating students' active participation. These teachers also reported the lack of proper support from their colleagues and principals, which resulted in a loss of confidence and enthusiasm. Besser, Lotem, and Zegler-Hill (2020) also highlighted the severe stress level of teachers during the adaptation period for online education. Similarly, German teachers showed medium-to-high stress levels because they experienced technical barriers, a low level of digital competence, a lack of adequate computer equipment, and low Internet connectivity (Klapproth, Federkeil, Heinschke, & Jungmann, 2020).

Method

A phenomenological study explores an in-depth understanding and description of participants' experiences and feelings regarding a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The present study utilized a phenomenological qualitative inquiry method to examine the professional experiences of Turkish teachers during the COVID-19 outbreak. According to Patton (2002), phenomenological research focuses on people's narratives, descriptions, and meaning-making of their lived experiences. This paper then examines how the teachers perceived the phenomenon of being a teacher in Turkey during the COVID-19 outbreak and how this particular global crisis and unprecedented times of education have affected the teachers' perceptions of the teaching profession.

Participants

A maximum variation sampling strategy was utilized to capture a wide range of perspectives on the research focus (Creswell, 2007). To this end, the researchers attempted to establish contact with teachers working at different levels of education and at different types of K–12 schools in different cities in Turkey. The data collection process took place in two phases. In the first phase, the researchers interviewed teachers who volunteered to participate, contacted via social media platforms. At this point, the snowball sampling method was also utilized. The interviewed teachers suggested colleagues who were information-rich and who had the potential to contribute to the study. The data collection was carried out via an online video conference program, and a total of 17 teachers were interviewed. To capture a wider range of perspectives about the research topic, researchers needed to continue the data collection process, so they contacted a colleague working at the Ministry of National Education for the purpose of participant recruitment. In this second phase, the colleague invited volunteer teachers to participate in the study through different professional groups, which have many teachers from different levels and branches. The researchers had video conferencing with 5 teachers reached in the second phase. All the online interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. In qualitative research, there are no strict rules regarding the sample size, and they may change based on the nature of the study. It is recommended to collect data until the information reaches redundancy (Patton, 2002).

A total of 22 interviews were conducted until a point of data saturation was reached (Francis et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009). Among the participating teachers, four were male and eighteen were female. Seven of the teachers had a Master's degree, and fifteen of them had a Bachelor's degree. The teachers worked at different types of K–12 schools in different cities in Turkey. Four of them worked at an elementary school, and two of them worked at a kindergarten. There were eight middle school and eight high school teachers. Most of the participating teachers worked at public schools, and there were three teachers working in private schools. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from 4 to 20 years, while half of them had more than ten years of experience. The demographics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Teachers' Background Information

Teacher	Gender	Subject	School Type	City	Experience (in years)	Education Level
T1	F	English	Middle	Antalya	6	Master's Degree
T2	F	English	Middle	Ankara	11	Bachelor's Degree
T3	M	Elementary School Teacher	Elementary	Karabük	20	Master's Degree
T4	F	English	Elementary and Middle	Bursa	11	Bachelor's Degree
T5	F	English	Middle	Zonguldak	9	Bachelor's Degree
T6	F	Turkish Literature	High	Karabük	10	Master's Degree
T7	F	Primary School Teacher	Elementary	Bursa	11	Bachelor's Degree
T8	M	Math	Middle	Karabük	18	Bachelor's Degree
T9	F	English	Private High	Ankara	4	Master's Degree
T10	M	Physical Education	High	Karabük	16	Master's Degree
T11	F	Turkish	Middle	Karabük	5	Bachelor's Degree
T12	F	Biology	High	Ankara	4	Bachelor's Degree
T13	M	Physics	Vocational and Technical High School	Tekirdağ	8	Master's Degree
T14	F	Math	Middle and High School (Both Private)	İstanbul	4	Bachelor's Degree
T15	F	Biology	Private High	Ankara	5	Bachelor's Degree
T16	F	Preschool	Kindergarten	Antalya	19	Bachelor's Degree
T17	F	Elementary School Teacher	Elementary	Ankara	5	Bachelor's Degree
T18	F	Math	Middle	Ankara	13	Bachelor's Degree
T19	F	Preschool	Kindergarten	İstanbul	17	Bachelor's Degree
T20	F	Philosophy	High School	Sivas	14	Master's Degree
T21	F	Elementary School Teacher	Elementary	Bursa	10	Bachelor's Degree
T22	M	Turkish	Middle	Antalya	16	Bachelor's Degree

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers developed the interview questions based on a literature review and their observations and insights as instructors teaching online during the outbreak. In addition to the background questions, the interview form included eight questions about teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak. Upon the development of the interview form, the interview questions were checked by an expert in educational sciences and by one teacher, and necessary revisions were made based on their

feedback. The interview questions were presented in Appendix A. The researchers analyzed and interpreted the collected data by carrying out content analysis. Audio data gathered through interviews were transcribed by the researchers. Before coding the entire data, two interviews were coded by both researchers. The intercoder consistency was calculated, and reliability was ensured with a consistency rate of over 90%. The data were coded using the concepts from the related literature, and categories and themes were formed. An electronic chart was prepared in an Office program, and the main categories, themes, and sub-themes were listed in that chart. Relevant quotations were transferred to that chart. Then the data were refined and reorganized in line with the emerged themes and sub-themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018).

Trustworthiness of the Study

Lincoln and Guba (1986) discussed the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Firstly, in this research, credibility was assured with the following measures: an in-depth description of the whole research process, prolonged time in data collection, getting expert opinions to develop the data collection tool, making quotations to better interpret the data, and analyzing the inter-coder reliability. In the double coding process, the researchers removed the redundant codes and organized the codes under the themes, as suggested by Creswell (2011). Furthermore, peer debriefing – the ongoing discussions among the authors about the themes and categories – was used to assure internal validity. Finally, a detailed description of the research was reported to support the transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

Results

We presented the results in line with five major themes: "*Challenges and Difficulties*," "*Opportunities*," "*Educational Inequities*," "*New Roles of Teachers*," and "*Motivation to Teach*."

Challenges and Difficulties

Analysis of the data yielded that teachers faced emotional challenges and professional challenges during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Emotional Challenges

All the teachers stated that they experienced worries, anxieties, and professional difficulties during the adaptation process. They explained that uncertainties, social distancing, staying at home, having new routines, and constantly worrying about getting infected affected them emotionally. T12 exemplified her emotional struggles during the lockdown by stating that: "*It was extremely troubling psychologically not to be able to leave the house, to be separated from our loved ones, to wear masks all the time, to be unable to go to work, and to witness people getting sick and dying from this disease every day*." The teachers continued to have similar worries when the schools reopened. T16 mentioned that face-to-face education was a difficult experience because of pandemic-related anxieties: "*I had a really hard time. I was terrified of bringing home the sickness from the students at school. I went into my classes double-masked.*"

Our interviews showed that the teachers experienced emotional exhaustion and stress because of the sudden changes in their lives. T2 described the difficulty of the adaptation process by stating that "*Making radical changes in our own lives and changing our professional habits was a very different and difficult experience*." The lack of psychological support and high expectations of the parents and school administration made it even more difficult for teachers to adapt to the changes in their personal and professional lives. According to T12, parents were so demanding that meeting their expectations negatively influenced her relationship with the students: "*Meeting different expectations of families and giving them personal attention and time made it a matter of having good relationships with families instead of having a rapport with children. It was partly because I was teaching younger students and also because the parents were very competitiv*e." T19 described the pressure she felt due to performance expectations: "*I felt a hidden pressure on me, and at the same time, there was a sense of inadequacy*." Again, T15 explained that the difficulty of separating school and home duties added new stressors to teachers' lives: "*Parents and administrators expected top performance. Also, we do not have definite working hours now. Our private lives were heavily disrupted.*"

Professional Challenges

Our analysis indicated that the rapid changes in the education system brought about new challenges in teachers' professional lives: *technical problems, assessment and instructional difficulties, difficulties of in-person teaching during the pandemic*.

Technical problems. The teachers mentioned technical problems such as a poor Internet connection and students' problems with cameras and microphones, which decreased the effectiveness of online lessons. T8 described the technical problems in detail:

"When there are no images or sounds of children on the screen, it is like we are lecturing to the wall. Interaction must be ensured. However, there are still students who cannot fix the microphone and camera problem. Because of Internet problems, we could not teach or we were frequently interrupted."

Those technical problems lead to classroom management problems, which decrease the effectiveness of online lessons. T18 clearly exemplified the problems:

"When I shared the sound of the videos on EBA, some students heard the sound of the video clearly while others did not hear it at all. The students were constantly interrupted and complained, 'I didn't hear, teacher, there's no sound, teacher..etc'. Thus, I was busy trying to fix the technical problems and it disturbed the flow of the lessons."

The teacher commented on classroom management and provided another example: "*On camera, I saw students who were eating and trying to listen to the lesson at the same time. It was hard to control the class.*"

Assessment and instructional difficulties. Planning and carrying out online lessons was a big challenge for most of them as they did not have prior training or experience. The limited resources of students and absence of adequate preparation added to the challenges the teachers faced during the sudden shift to distance education. T10, a physical education teacher, told us he had difficulty planning the lessons during distance education: *"Physical education requires students being active and our objectives are mostly in the psychomotor domain. Thus, the online lessons were not very effective as it was really difficult to plan and carry out remote physical activities.*"

The teachers told us they had to make some adaptations to their lesson plans due to the limited time allocated for online lessons. T20 explained that "*We had to keep it brief, so we could not carry out hands-on activities or provide enough examples. We had to change all our plans.*" Similarly, as the online activities took a relatively long time, it was challenging to keep up with the syllabus for the teachers. T18 shared an example:

"We had an activity explaining the relationship of the area of a parallelogram to the area of a rectangle. I had to continue in the 2nd lesson because I could not complete an activity in 1 lesson hour in EBA that could have been completed in 15 minutes in the classroom environment. The duration of the activity was prolonged because the student could not clearly understand the points that he would connect and cut. Besides, I had a hard time doing the activity, and I decided not to do it in my other lessons."

In addition, when the MoNE decided to have face-to-face lessons two days a week in elementary schools, the class hours were reduced, and the teachers found it hard to keep up with the syllabus. T4 explained the problems they encountered:

"There was a period when students came to school for two days. At that time, we had a much harder time. Class hours were very low. It was face-to-face education, but it was very inefficient. What could be done in 30 minutes? At least online lessons lasted 2 hours. When 30 minutes of in-person sessions were not enough, I had to talk to the parents and have additional lessons at the weekend. The school was open, but there was no point in being together. We were distant. We could not play games. We had to constantly warn the children. It wasn't nice to constantly restrict children at play age when they needed to socialize with their peers."

Assessment and evaluation were also challenging for the teachers. T21 briefly explained the assessment and evaluation problems she encountered: "*We couldn't get direct feedback. You ask the child a question, and from there, his/her mother answers. There were no exams at higher levels. That's why we don't know how far they have progressed and how far they have lagged behind.*" Similarly, the teachers pointed out that homework completion rates remained low. For example, T18 said that "*The students did not get the homework done. Only 3-5 students were doing the tests on EBA.*"

Difficulties of in-person teaching during the pandemic. Once the schools re-opened, teaching in-person brought about different challenges and difficulties for the students and the teachers. Teaching and learning socially distanced and masked was difficult for the teachers and the students. In this regard, T7 mentioned that

> "*I had a hard time teaching the first graders because you need to have physical contact with the younger kids. You have to hold their hand to teach them how to hold a pencil, you have to stay close while playing... I often forgot the rules of the pandemic. I realized that I was unconsciously holding their hands. Then I felt sad and worried.*"

Similarly, T4 pointed out that social and physical distancing during in-person teaching negatively influenced the effectiveness of lessons. The teacher further explained social distancing measures were especially hard on children due to restricted movement and peer interaction: "*School was open but being together was not meaningful. We were socially distanced, we could not play games. We had to warn the students all the time. The children are at the play age, they want to socialize with their friends. It was unpleasant to constantly limit them.*"

Opportunities

Our analysis showed that the obligatory transition to distance education also created new opportunities for both teachers and students. Under this theme, opportunities for the teachers and opportunities for the students were presented.

Opportunities for the teachers

This subtheme included the following categories: professional growth and collaboration within the school community.

Professional Growth. The obligatory transition to distance education created new opportunities, and most of the teachers developed new skills to better integrate educational technologies into their teaching. T21 described how she developed new skills to better integrate educational technologies into her teaching: "*I had the opportunity to improve myself every day. I had the opportunity to try new things. I attended as many in-service training sessions as I could.*" T12 also emphasized that the transition to online education positively affected the teachers' professional development and considered it an opportunity to catch up with technological developments: "*It helped us take some steps to keep up with the digital age. In other words, I can say that the distance education and teachers' being intertwined with technology provided an advantage in terms of professional development.*"

Collaboration within the school community. The findings showed that the new education ecosystem enriched the collaboration between educators. T21 described the ways the transition to distance education influenced the professional networks in their school and told that I *shared new information and tips with my colleagues. Our school principal and other teachers all shared everything with each other.*" According to T7, the emerging need to learn new skills and techniques particularly strengthened the collaboration between novice and experienced teachers. T7 also told us she benefited from the ideas shared on social media:

> "*In the past, we used to hesitate when recommending something to our experienced friends. Now, I think they have become more open to learning because they wanted to learn things that will make their jobs easier… I learned a lot from other teachers too. For example, I got ideas from groups on social media. I learned about applications and digital platforms.*"

Based on our conversations with the teachers, we perceived that the new learning environment connected teachers and school administrators and encouraged professional learning networks both within and outside the school community.

Opportunities for the Students

Our analysis also showed that distance education brought about new opportunities for some learners. Students who had learning difficulties in traditional classes turned out to be more productive and hardworking during distance education. For most teachers, it was surprising to see the positive impact of distance education on learners. T13 described how his students thrived in online classes: "*At first I was worried, to be honest, I thought that we could not teach physics even in the classroom, how would it be with distance education? But the feedback was not like that, frankly speaking, I was surprised. We've seen some students learn better.*" Similarly, T4 implied that students found new opportunities in home learning that led to improvements in student learning outcomes. The teacher underlined the positive impact of increased parental involvement in the distance education experiences of students: "*I have also had students who have made surprising progress during distance education. We also saw that the family became more involved. The parent took responsibility and this affected the child's success positively.*" It was apparent that the crisis became an opportunity for parents to gain more insights into the education of their children, so they felt more responsible for supporting them academically.

Educational Inequities

Our findings disclosed that the COVID-19 crisis reinforced deep-rooted inequities in the Turkish education context. In other words, the digital divide and the consequences of the privatization of education became more visible.

Digital Divide

According to the teachers, distance education widened the gap between students from high and low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and the quality differences between schools became more visible. Some students did not have access to digital devices and the Internet to attend online lessons. T2 pointed out that distance education was hard for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of learners in particular: "*Unfortunately, due to economic hardships, our students in socioeconomically disadvantaged regions had difficulties in accessing digital tools required for distance education.*" In this regard, T4 mentioned that EBA support centers established at schools to help the students who could not have access to digital tools did not work as planned:

> "*There were many disadvantaged students in our region. Even if we provided them with computers and Internet access at the EBA centers, those students still suffered. Many families did not want their kids to come to school and study at the centers. We told the families that EBA centers were safe and the children used the computers alone in a private room. However, the families were so worried about the pandemic that they would not change their minds.*"

Analysis of the data revealed that the Covid 19 pandemic reinforced the socioeconomic factors that contributed to the digital divide. Socioeconomic hardships and lower level parental support added to the inequities and negatively impacted attendance. Distance education was especially hard on younger students whose parents were not home to help them. To illustrate, T19 said that:

> "*The children of working parents could not access the materials I sent or those prepared by the Ministry of National Education, and they could not do the planned activities at home. Those children were taken care of by the elderly individuals at home and they did not have access to digital devices. So, my students were left behind, which was so sad for me.*"

Our interviews also showed that when the number of children was greater than the number of digital devices at home, students could not attend online lessons regularly. The teachers with partners who needed computers and the Internet for their work faced the same access problem as kids. On the other hand, some teachers lacked technological content knowledge, which added to the inequities encountered during the pandemic. For example, T12 expressed that "*It is also known that there are*

significant differences among teachers in terms of their ability to access and use digital tools." Similarly, T18 commented on the inequities and digital divide: "*Distance education reinforced educational inequities. Unfortunately, even the teachers do not have access to decent digital devices and a stable Internet connection. When two teachers teach online in the same house, the problems get more complicated.*"

Privatization of Education

The pandemic has made the consequences of the privatization of education apparent. During the pandemic, teachers working at private schools encountered job security and insurance problems. Even if they worked longer hours during distance education, the school did not pay their full salaries. For instance, T15 explained that "*My school cut our salaries and did not pay our insurance. I suffered financially and emotionally.*" T3 also had financial problems and expressed that "*If the work done continues to be unpaid, the options for changing institution will be considered.*" Apparently, these negative experiences decreased teachers' motivation to work at their schools and made teaching during the pandemic even more stressful. On the other hand, teachers working at public schools thought that having a government job was a privilege as it provided regular income and job security. T19 expressed the gratitude that she felt about working at a public school: "*When I witnessed the economic problems experienced by my colleagues working in private education institutions, I better understood the importance of job security.*"

New Roles of Teachers

This theme included the following subthemes: professional responsibility reconsidered and a sense of social responsibility.

Professional Responsibility Reconsidered

Uncertainties and rapid changes in the education system caused by the COVID-19 pandemic created new factors affecting teachers' perceptions of the teaching profession and reminded them of their vital roles in the education of children. The teachers also emphasized that distance education showed them that the use of technology in education was not effective without teachers' guidance and commitment. For example, T16 said that "*I do not think that robots or any technological device can replace teachers now nor in the future. I can clearly and unequivocally say that both students and parents are aware of this fact.*" Similarly, T2 pointed out the vital role of teachers in the education of children:

> *"As a result of the circumstances I have observed throughout the pandemic, I do not think that this could have been maintained if it had not been for the teacher's commitment. Both a classical-style education and technology-based education system cannot be effectively implemented without the teacher's efforts."*

Likewise, most of the teachers thought teachers gained more respect and gratitude during school closures. For example, T5 thought that the changes brought about by the pandemic positively affected the perceptions of society regarding the teaching profession: "*Parents and society, in general, have started to respect the teaching profession more. Since parents were with their children all day, they understood how important school was and how much patience it took to be a teacher.*" However, there were teachers who thought their profession not respected enough in their communities. For instance, T22 mentioned the loss of reputation and prestige of the profession during the pandemic and the value given to the profession:

> *"Recent years have already seen a negative attitude towards teachers and it has become even worse during the pandemic. Some people think we make money by lying about… I am a village boy. The teacher was valuable in my village, so I decided to be a teacher even if I had other options. I suffered a lot to get my degree… At this point, the dignity of teaching has been lost and teachers are considered babysitters. I feel sorry about these injustices... The government must first make teaching financially attractive to make our profession respected again."*

A Sense of Social Responsibility

In addition to their professional duties, teachers felt responsible for helping their communities during difficult times. First of all, they tried to inform the parents and the students and comfort them when the parents were stressed out. To illustrate, T19 explained that "*I followed scientific explanations and publications about the virus and shared this information with parents over the phone.*" In addition to supporting the students emotionally, most teachers tried hard to reach out to those who had access problems. For the students who did not have computers, teachers shared online exercises that could be done and educational videos that could be watched on cell phones. They also prepared worksheets and practice materials for the students who could not benefit from online activities. T4 told us how she tried to help her students with access problems:

> *"I had a student whose parents were separated. His father works in the city center. The child stays with his grandmother in a village. As he had no computer or Internet, he could only watch the lesson on EBA TV. I think the lessons on EBA were very useful, fun, and instructive. Besides, I prepared worksheets for these students and left them at school. I told the parents that they could stop by once a week and get the worksheets. It really helped the families as they did not have the opportunity to print out the materials."*

Moreover, there were teachers who gave their old computers or other devices to the students in need. For example, T7 mentioned that:

> *"Two of my students could not attend the online lessons. One of them studied at the EBA center at school but he could not attend the evening sessions. The other one was in a village. He had no computer and Internet. I was very worried about him. I loaded educational videos onto an old computer at home and took it to his home in the village. I put the videos in order. I showed him how to use the computer. I talked to his mother. I was still worried. I always thought of the children I could not reach. In the background, I am planning catch-up programs to help them next year."*

Motivation to Teach

Most teachers stated that their motivation to teach had decreased owing to the emotional and professional difficulties they experienced. The aforementioned educational problems they encountered negatively influenced teachers' motivation to teach and made distance education more challenging for them. To illustrate, T18 said that:

> *"There were times when I thought that my efforts were futile. I carefully planned the lesson and saw that only 7 out of 30 students were attending the online sessions. Although they had the opportunity, some parents and students did not take the online lessons seriously. I was both disappointed and angry and it lowered my motivation."*

Even if the increased stress level negatively influenced their motivation during the pandemic, teachers developed their own strategies to cope with the emotional exhaustion and lowered motivation during this time. For example, T20 expressed that "*The stress and anxiety caused by uncertainty decreased my motivation. However, I tried to overcome the obstacles and considered the challenges as an opportunity to improve myself professionally.*" In this respect, T17 said that

> *"Of course, teaching online was not something we were accustomed to. Working with the younger age group, it took some time for them to adapt to the new system. I realized that my students missed me, their friends, and their school. They needed me and it motivated me to teach."*

Based on our conversations with the teachers, we recognized that, in addition to the need for professional development, their sense of responsibility and the care and affection they felt for their students re-motivated the teachers to work harder during a difficult time of global crisis.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Suggestions

Our aim in this study was to explore the impact of the unprecedented global crisis on teachers' perceptions of the teaching profession. Overall, the results showed that the COVID-19 outbreak caused a sudden shift to distance education, which created new opportunities and challenges for both the teachers and the students. To start with, previous research indicated that the psychological effects of the pandemic on teachers were remarkable (Besser et al., 2020; Burić & Kim, 2020; Ozamiz-Etxebarria, Berasategi Santxo, Idoiaga Mondragon, & Dosil Santamaría, 2021; Sarışık, Gürel, Uslu, & Dönmez, 2022). The teachers in our study also reported fear, anxiety, and stress at all stages of the pandemic. In the early days of the outbreak, uncertainties and rapid changes in their private and professional lives triggered stress and anxiety among teachers. While teaching in person during the pandemic, teachers were worried about being infected and transmitting the virus to their students. We also understood that there were no support mechanisms to help teachers during these emotionally challenging times. Teachers had to develop their own coping strategies for their mental well-being. Teachers' burnout-stress predictors were recently reported as COVID-19 anxiety, current teaching anxiety, anxiety of communicating with parents, and lack of mentoring and administrative support (Akyıldız & Yurtbakan, 2021; Judd, Rember, Pellegrini, Ludlow, & Meisner, 2020; Pressley, 2021). In this regard, Collie (2021) found that autonomy-supportive leadership was associated with lower stress levels and emotional exhaustion among teachers. She further argued that teachers navigate challenges at work better when they are supported through participative leadership strategies in schools. Therefore, it might be suggested that policies prioritize establishing effective leadership practices among school principals and providing emotional and academic support to teachers to better cope with stressful working conditions. To this end, professional development programs can focus on developing the school principals' leadership skills to address the teachers' emotional and professional needs. Similarly, as a part of school development plans, schools might develop partnership programs with healthcare professionals to guide the school team to cope with work-related stressors.

Our study also showed that in addition to emotional challenges, teachers faced professional challenges due to the lack of prior training or experience in using educational technologies and digital tools for instructional purposes. In Turkey, e-learning course contents and instructional materials have been digital since the FATIH Project was launched in 2010. With this project, it was aimed to provide all schools with high-speed and secure Internet (VPN), hardware and software in all classrooms, e-contents, and platforms for the participation of teachers in IT (MoNE, 2021e). COVID-19 has accelerated the design and implementation of distance learning systems. The transition to distance education increased the visibility of the FATIH Project. In fact, it has provided a great research opportunity to assess the effectiveness of projects and initiatives working towards technology integration in education. Aytaç (2021) found out that the experiences of teachers during the outbreak pointed to a need for further improvements in infrastructure and digital content developed through FATIH Project. Within this context, our study showed that technical problems, assessment and instructional difficulties were among the most challenging problems for teachers during distance education. Studies conducted both in Turkey and in other countries also revealed that planning and carrying out online lessons was a big challenge for teachers as they did not have prior training or experience (Alves et al., 2021; Asbury & Kim, 2020; Bakioğlu & Çevik, 2020; Giovannella et al., 2020; Kaden, 2020). Emerging studies suggested that teachers did not go beyond emergency online practices (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Murphy, 2020; TEDMEM, 2020a). Drawing upon these findings, it can be concluded that teachers need training on the effective use of technology for instructional purposes (Avcı & Güven, 2021; Erümit, 2021). Drummond and Sweeney (2017) asserted that preparing prospective teachers for effective technology integration practices in their future classrooms needs to be a critical agenda for teacher education. Again, as noted in prior research, teachers faced different instructional difficulties when the teacher education programs did not adequately address this emergent need (Fullan, 1993; Quezada et al., 2020). Considering the difficulties experienced by the teachers, pre-service and in-service teacher education should focus on instructional approaches enriched with the active use of technology and innovative digital tools so that

teachers can keep up with rapid changes in information technologies. In other words, teacher preparation programs should equip future teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to better integrate new and emerging technologies into their classroom practices.

In addition to increasing teachers' competenc, policies should target betterments in school infrastructures for the effective use of educational technologies. Our study showed that the pandemic reinforced the deep-rooted inequities in education. Previous research also indicated that students who did not have access to digital devices and the Internet to attend online lessons were left behind (Chabbott & Sinclair, 2020; Kaden, 2020; TEDMEM, 2020a; Yıldız & Akar Vural, 2020). As future classrooms will necessitate the effective use of educational technologies, policies should be developed to provide accessible and affordable technological resources for all. COVID-19 education recovery will also require preparing education systems to better respond to the crisis through equitable financing of education and quality improvements in schools. Our study disclosed that the outbreak hit the students from lower socioeconomic classes hardest due to the access problems, socioeconomic hardships of their families, and lower-level parental support during distance education. From a social justice perspective, redistributive measures should be taken to provide economically, socially, and educationally disadvantaged students with material resources (UNESCO, 2020d).

While disadvantaged schools were the most vulnerable to the crisis, private schools suffered from financial difficulties, which put teachers' jobs at risk (Alam & Tiwari, 2021; Imran & Ahmad, 2020). In a similar vein, prior research revealed that teachers with lower job security showed higher scores for depression, anxiety, and stress during the pandemic (Aruta, Balingit, & de Vera, 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). In Turkey, the teachers working in private shared similar concerns, and the possibility of being unemployed made the pandemic more stressful for them (TEDMEM, 2020b). During the pandemic, many parents took their children out of private schools and enrolled them in public schools. This caused severe financial problems, especially for the low-cost private schools. Those schools had to reduce staff numbers and cut the teachers' salaries. To prevent this problem, the MoNE implemented a controversial measure, and student transfers from private to public schools were not permitted for a certain period, which triggered angry reactions from parents (Milliyet, 2020). Nevertheless, the results of this study point to the job security and teacher pay problems for those working at low-cost private institutions. Teachers working at private schools reported that they experienced high levels of stress because of job insecurity. Our interviews also demonstrated that the negative experiences of the teachers working at private schools reinforced the belief that it is a privilege to work in public schools. In this sense, urgent steps should be taken to improve the teachers' economic status and social rights in public and private schools.

To find good in an unpleasant situation, the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us once again of the importance of collaboration, communication, and support within a learning community. Our participants reported that the pandemic increased their collaboration with other teachers and administrators. Research has indicated that colleagues have supported each other emotionally and enriched their professional development experiences during the pandemic (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). In a similar vein, distance education has created new opportunities for some students who benefited from digital technologies and home learning. Our study also demonstrated that creating a strong connection between home life and school builds richer learning experiences. During distance education, most parents have gained more insights into their children's education, and they have become more supportive, which has impacted students' academic achievement positively. As they have become more involved in the education of children, parents have appreciated teachers' work more. In this sense, increased appreciation and awareness might be an asset for educators in building a stronger school and home relationship.

Our study demonstrated that decreased opportunities for social interaction, reduced instruction time, increasing use of digital tools, and shifting from face-to-face learning to the distance route had altered the school lives, teachers' motivation to teach, and the common understanding of the teaching profession. Our findings confirmed that teachers in Turkey showed a great sense of social responsibility during COVID-19 outbreak. As an instance, teachers were also among the professional groups that played an active role in the Vefa Social Support Groups, coordinated by the Ministry of Interior during the outbreak (Gökmenoğlu & Doğan, 2022). They helped to meet the needs of citizens aged 65 and over, and those with chronic diseases by delivering their homes medicine, food, hygiene materials and so on (Ministry of Interior, 2020). The teachers participating in this study showed a similar social responsibility for their communities, and worked hard both to find solutions to their students' educational problems and to support the families and students during difficult times.

COVID-19 has not only been responsible for deaths but also for radical changes in the daily routines of teachers and students all over the world. Although the literature highlights that the whole school community has been severely affected by the pandemic, the long-term consequences of COVID-19 are not yet known (Nickerson & Sulkowski, 2021). An important finding of this study was that due to restricted movement and peer interaction, social distancing measures were hard on children and the effectiveness of lessons decreased during in-person teaching. While a significant amount of research regarding the profound effects of the pandemic on education has begun to accumulate in the literature, there is still limited knowledge about how to deal with the challenges that arise from pandemic responses, such as social distancing and emergency online practices in the long run. This limited knowledge prevents us from predicting the future of education in the post-pandemic world (Murphy, 2020). However, each effort to seek to understand the complex and evolving impacts of the pandemic upon teachers and students is invaluable for informing education policy and practice after the COVID-19 crisis is over. Even though our study offers several implications for policymakers and educators to plan educational recovery from COVID-19, its results are limited to the perspectives and self-reported experiences of the participating teachers. Further research investigating the perspectives of other stakeholders and policy analysis, and large-scale survey studies that examine the impact of COVID-19 on education will complement our analysis.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. What were your experiences as a teacher during the COVID-19 outbreak?

2. What do you think about being a teacher during the unprecedented times of COVID -19? How did you feel during the outbreak?

3. What kinds of difficulties have you experienced while teaching in the time of COVID -19?

4. Have your professional activities changed during the outbreak? If yes, what were those changes? (Think about instructional activities, communication with the students, classroom management, lesson planning, testing and evaluation, and so on?)

5. Have you experienced any changes in your perception of the teaching profession during the COVID-19 outbreak? If yes, what kinds of changes have you experienced?

6. Have difficulties and challenges you experienced during the outbreak affected your motivation to teach?

7. Have your perceptions regarding the future of the teaching profession changed in the time of COVID-19? If yes, how did the COVID-19 outbreak change your perceptions of the future of the teaching profession?

8. Would you like to add anything about teaching during the outbreak?