



## Being a Pioneering Alternative School in Turkey: Values, Pedagogical Practices, and Challenges \*

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### Abstract

Recently, a few parent co-op alternative school initiatives have emerged in Turkey, a type of schooling that was largely missing in the history of the country due to the highly centralized education system at the national level. In this case study, we explored the pedagogical practices of an alternative parent co-op K-4 school in Ankara, Turkey. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten participants, thick descriptions of observations of the school site, analysis of school official documents, and subjected to inductive content analysis. Triangulation of the multiple data sources suggested that the school adopted the following values: democratic governance; a sense of community; holistic education; teacher and child autonomy. These values yielded a set of challenges, namely, blurry roles across all parties and power struggles among the teachers and parents; excessive time spent for achieving consensus among all parties; and the absence of school models to guide curriculum and instructional planning. Findings are discussed in the light of theories and previous findings on alternative schooling around the world.

### Keywords

Alternative schools  
Co-op schools  
Democratic education  
Alternative education  
School innovation  
School change

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### Introduction

Searches for alternatives to the public education system date back as far as the beginning of public education itself. As early as 1762, Rousseau rejected the external discipline imposed on children in the newly emerging public schools and advocated for teaching children based on their curiosity and interest (Rousseau, 1905). Since then, various alternative school systems have been developed around the world. Among these were John Dewey's (1938) progressive schools, which emphasized experiential learning as opposed to the traditional education mode, which was intended to pass information from generation to generation. Montessori schools, started in Italy in 1906, aimed to cultivate self-discipline and intrinsic motivation, and rejected rewards and punishment (Montessori, 2004). The aim of Waldorf schools, which started in Germany in 1919, was to educate children holistically (Uhrmacher, 1995) by emphasizing empathy and whole-body learning (Steiner, 2003). So-called *free schools* such as Summerhill (Neill, 1960) aimed to develop children as happy human beings, not just productive workers. While there are important philosophical, structural, and pedagogical distinctions among these different types

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of alternative schools, all emphasize individuality, sense of community in a family-like atmosphere, cooperation over competition, and innovative pedagogical methods promoting teacher and student autonomy (Nagata, 2007).

During the last two decades, alternative schools have been under the spotlight again as learning science research has underscored the promise of their pedagogical approaches that embody authentic learning for helping children develop complex problem-solving skills and adapt to the information age (Sliwka, 2008). Thus, a wave of school innovation similar to those of the early and mid-20th century has taken off with the mission of adapting education to the information age. One such movement is called the *micro-school movement* often operated by technology leaders in Silicon Valley (Horn, 2015; Prothero, 2016; Tanz, 2015). These are small schools in which multiple-age children learn together in classrooms that are equipped with advanced educational technologies and research-based instruction personalized by hands-on learning.

Unlike the long history of alternative schooling in the West, on the other hand, the centrally regulated Turkish education system has prevented similar movements from flourishing in the country (Akdağ & Korkmaz, 2008). Lately, however, promising new alternative school models have emerged. In this study, we explored a recently founded democratic parent co-op K-4 school in Turkey that bears philosophical, organizational, and pedagogical similarities to the Western alternatives mentioned above. We aimed to closely examine what this type of schooling offers in terms of pedagogical innovation.

#### ***Alternative Education: Definition, Foundations, and Adoption by Mainstream Education Reforms***

Lacking a precise definition, alternative education is today a *fragmented landscape* (Sliwka, 2008), as the search for viable options to mainstream schools has resulted in a variety of movements over the decades (Spring, 1999). We adopt a broad definition of *alternative education* to refer to alternatives to mainstream education, which are philosophically conceived and strategically designed to provide innovative curriculum, a flexible learning environment, and a family-like school community in which cooperation is valued over competition. (Nagata, 2007; Sliwka, 2008).

One of the most influential theoretical foundations of alternative education has been Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy. Freire (1970) criticized mainstream schools for reproducing the relationships of power, oppression, and inequality in society. He referred to the *banking* concept of education, in which teacher-directed instruction is viewed as a process of making *deposits* of knowledge into students, which they *store*. As an alternative to this accumulative concept of learning, he offered the concept of teaching and learning as problem-posing and problem-solving, an active process that promotes meaningful knowledge development and critical thinking, which lead to the liberation of individuals and the transformation of society (for a review of critical pedagogy, see, Tyner-Mullings, 2012). Based on this concept, proponents of critical pedagogy have devised methods of student-based inquiry and dialogue which flatten the hierarchical relationship between students and teachers (for a review, see, Apple & Au, 2009). Within these methods, students' voices contribute to the creation, implementation, and evaluation of their learning; and their experiences, knowledge, and culture are central resources for curriculum (Tyner-Mullings, 2012).

The pedagogical approaches developed at alternative schools are increasingly being adopted by mainstream schools with the overarching aim of aligning education with the needs of students in the information age (Sliwka & Yee, 2015). Traditional schools, based on the requirements of the industrial age of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, are widely regarded as obsolete today. Often characterized as *factory models* (Jung, Reigeluth, Kim, & Trepper, 2019), they emphasize transmitting a standardized body of knowledge and skills to prepare students for conventional factory or office employment or to pursue further education for medical, legal, engineering, or teaching careers. However, it is argued that today's information economy requires creativity, innovation, critical thinking, and idea generation (for a review, see, Sawyer, 2008). As a result, many modern reform movements propose educational models

in which students learn by pursuing individualized goals, defining, and finding solutions to problems, and progressing in a self-directed manner, with teacher and community members as facilitators, in small and democratically governed schools (Aslan & Reigeluth, 2019). These models encourage students to learn deeply and meaningfully through authentic activities in which they solve problems in real-world interdisciplinary projects. Also referred to as *project-based education*, this approach positions students as owners of their learning and teachers as guides, fostering relationships based on mutual respect and a sense of community (Bradley-Levine & Moiser, 2017).

### ***History of Alternative Education in Turkey***

In the early 20th century, critical education movements from the late Ottoman to modern Turkey were mainly centred on instilling positive attitudes toward scientific thinking in counterpoint to traditional Islamic views (İnal, 2015). With the foundation of the modern republic of Turkey, the new country needed to develop the literacy of the rural population as well as foster new ideas such as secularism and democracy that would bring the country into alignment with the developed world (Altunya, 2014). To this end, Village Institutes (1940-1953) were founded to train teachers to serve as change agents in rural settlements. The pedagogy of Village Institutes focused on democratic participation with school parliaments and on holistic learning methods such as job-based, experiential, and cooperative learning (Altunya, 2014; Tısilöğlü, Kaya, & Çağiltay, 2018). This approach, however, was ahead of its time. It was expected that the Village Institutes would modernize the newly founded republic by disseminating its secular and democratic values, raising the intellectual level of peasants, and developing modern approaches to agriculture (Karaomerlioglu, 1998). Instead, the ensuing ideological conflicts first absorbed the new model into mainstream education and then ended it in 1953. While the model of the Village Institutes was innovative, being operated by the state made them vulnerable to the strong currents of the old ways.

Due to the nation's monolithic legal and political structure (Akdağ & Korkmaz, 2008), until recently, there have been no independent alternative schools in Turkey except a few Montessori pre-schools. The first Turkish education textbooks featuring critical pedagogy were not published until the 1990s (Akdağ & Korkmaz, 2008). The first alternative education symposium was held in 2005, which led to the foundation of the Alternative Education Association (Akdağ & Korkmaz, 2008). In 2009, the *Another School is Possible* association was founded, which built its own alternative school model on the axis of alternative education, democratic governance, ecological preservation, and private financing (BBOM, n.d.).

### ***Criticisms of the Mainstream Turkish Education System***

The mainstream Turkish education system has received much criticism for failing to prepare learners with science-based information age skills. Turkey's lower than average ranking among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries on measures of math, science, and reading has raised concerns about students' analysing, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities (OECD, 2019). Even though the curriculum reform in 2005 officially changed the pedagogy from behaviorist to cognitivist and constructivist (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2017), the change resulted in little real application in classrooms (Bozdoğan & Altunçekiç, 2007; Dinç & Doğan, 2010; Fidan & Duman, 2014; Yıldırım & Dönmez, 2008).

Criticisms of the education system extend to the affective domain. According to the PISA 2018 results, 56% of students in Turkey reported low life satisfaction, and Turkey ranked as one of the lowest countries at the domain of sense of belonging at school (OECD, 2019). Relatedly, Tüfekçi and Okutan (2006) reported that 80% of the teachers in Turkey managed their classrooms by shouting at children, and Kaldırım (2015) found that eighth-grade students had several misconceptions about the democratic values the schools intended to foster. The most recent policy change introduced values education to highlight the affective domain, which had previously been ignored (MoNE, 2018). It is not evident, however, whether this policy change had discernible positive influences on educational practices.

### *The Current Study*

An alternative school system can serve as a model to offer insights into how to improve the teaching of democratic values and information age skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, critical thinking, and positive learning attitudes in mainstream education. To this end, we investigated the educational practices and organizational structure of an innovative school that operates as a democratic parent co-op K-4 school in the capital of Turkey, Ankara. According to the school's mission statement, its program is centred on democratic participation, ecological awareness, recognition of children's rights, and learner- and community-centred instructional and evaluation methods. Given the highly centralized education system in Turkey, we were interested in exploring how the school has been able to develop as an alternative school, implement a learner-centred curriculum, and become sustainable in pursuing its goals. Our investigation was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the characteristics of alternative education as implemented in the school?

RQ2. What are the challenges to implementing alternative education in the school?

In the current study we aimed to make both theoretical and practical contributions. Our first aim was to contribute to the literature on alternative education in the context of Turkey. Previous related studies include the history of critical education movement in Turkey (Akdağ & Korkmaz, 2008; İnal, 2015), empirical investigation of leadership in *Another School is Possible (ASIP/BBOM)* schools (Beycioglu & Kondakçı, 2017), and Turkish educators' perceptions and conceptualizations of alternative education (Memduhoğlu, Mazlum, & Alav, 2015). Building on this body of work, we investigated how a pioneering model of alternative education is practiced in an experimental school in the capital of Turkey. Second, we aimed to provide an organized set of findings and discussion for practitioners who might be interested in building, or improving, similar models and schools. Third, we aimed to provide a tested model for policymakers who are seeking innovative pedagogical practices that support the development of democracy to incorporate into the national education system.

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

*Anatolia Alternative Elementary School* (pseudonym) is one of few alternative and parent co-op schools in Turkey. To investigate this innovative but little-known school in-depth, we conducted an illustrative qualitative single-case study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative case studies are used to examine little-known and innovative systems through focused investigation of real-life contexts including such factors as their environments, individuals involved, specific events, and other aspects of their current states (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

The unit of analysis of the study is the school, which has multiple alternative dimensions from its organizational to the pedagogical structure. While we were primarily interested in the pedagogical aspects, as Pettigrew, Woodman, and Cameron (2001) noted in their seminal work, in organizational innovation multiple related processes are in play at different levels, all impacting the innovative pedagogy of the organization. Similarly, after our initial data analysis, we arrived at the conclusion that it was impossible to depict a truthful representation of the school's pedagogy without considering its democratic organizational structure because the organizational structure directly impacted the implementation of learning activities in the classroom. Therefore, we did not exclude the emergence of themes at the organizational level but included them in our results to the extent that they shed light on the findings at the pedagogical level. However, we do not claim to offer an exhaustive analysis of the democratic values and processes at the organizational level, nor do we take a philosophical or political standpoint in relation to these values in the current study. We hope, however, that our study provides insight into what this unique organization offers in terms of innovative pedagogical practices.

### *Research Site*

Anatolia Alternative Elementary School (pseudonym), located in Ankara, was founded in 2015 as a parent co-op school to be governed by participatory democracy practices with the goal of educating children to be self-realized and placing social and ecological values above commercial interests. By the time our work was completed in 2019, the school had 52 students and nine teachers, all of whom held undergraduate teaching degrees from Turkish universities. The parents were mostly middle-class with higher education degrees and white-collar employment. While most paid tuition for their children to attend Anatolia Alternative Elementary School, a full scholarship was awarded to one child.

While the school followed the National Education Ministry's (MoNE) 2013 elementary school curriculum, emphasis was placed on providing a holistic education with a focus on affective learning including recognizing, expressing, and managing emotions, conflict resolution, respecting others and sharing. A typical day at school began with classroom circles in which children expressed their emotions and planned the rest of their day, after which they studied individually according to their personal weekly plans for 50 minutes. Then, two class periods were allocated to teaching academic subjects followed by lunchtime, when teachers and students gathered at tables in the kitchen for meals prepared with organic products. The lunch break was followed by English language classes, music, physical education, or workshops.

### *Participants*

The teaching and administrator staff reflects a clear image of the new establishment of the school. Most of the teachers are novices and new in the profession. Meral, a pseudonym for the school manager, had taught seven years before joining the school two months before when the research started. As a novice school manager, she was full of excitement and creative ideas for the education of the children and the future of the school. The most experienced teacher was Aylin with nine years of teaching experience. Most of the teachers held teaching credentials in elementary teaching, while Şeyma had teaching credentials in English language teaching, Narin was a physical education teacher. The school also had a counsellor who worked closely with the managing staff and the teachers and parents (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Participants

<b>Teacher's pseudonym</b>	<b>Teacher's role</b>	<b>Experience at the school</b>	<b>Background</b>
Berna (F)	Preschool Teacher	3 years	7 years of experience in private and public schools
Özge (F)	Preschool Teacher	3 years	Previous teaching experience in private and public schools
Aylin (F)	Elementary school teacher	5 months	9 years teaching experience in private schools
Deniz (F)	Elementary school teacher	2 years	Previous experience in teaching drama
Kemal (M)	Elementary school teacher	5 months	Previous experience as educational volunteer
Hülya (F)	Part time elementary school teacher	5 months	Previous experience as educational volunteer and teaching at after school courses
Şeyma (F)	English language teacher	5 months	Novice teacher
Narin (F)	Physical education teacher	2 years	2 years of experience as swimming trainer, lifeguard, summer courses in private schools
Esra (F)	Psychological Counsellor	5 months	Novice teacher with dual BA in psychological counseling and special education
Meral (F)	School manager	2 months	7 years of teaching at high schools

Note: All names are pseudonyms to preserve the confidentiality of the participants and the school.

### ***Data Collection***

Prior to data collection, we prepared a semi-structured interview and observation guide to explore the school's alternative education practices and teachers' experiences with and opinions about them in relation to our broad definition of alternative schooling, and the mission statement on the school's website (see above sections). The semi-structured interview protocol included six sub-dimensions to capture a holistic understanding of alternative education practice: a) teachers' roles, b) curriculum, c) instruction and evaluation, d) teachers' professional development, e) communication and cooperation with stakeholders, and f) benefits and challenges of implementing and maintaining the alternative school model. The observation guide included four sub-dimensions: a) school environment (both physical and psychological), b) formal structure of the classroom (roles, responsibilities, and relationships within the classroom), c) in-class interactions, and d) in-class activities. Both forms were subjected to expert review prior to data gathering.

All nine teachers and the school administrator were interviewed based on the semi-structured interview form. The interviews took place one-on-one in a private room in the school during the teachers' preferred time slots to ensure a comfortable and confidential space. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes with an average of around 60 minutes.

In addition, the first author conducted 40 hours of observation in the period of a month. As a non-participant observer, she introduced herself and the aim of her visit to the students, staff, and teachers. She observed each class for the whole school day, joined children and teachers for breakfast and lunch in the kitchen, listened to the interactions among teachers in their break room, observed the activities in the outdoor facilities, and sat down with children and teachers at the circles of school parliamentary meetings. Besides the scheduled interviews, she consulted informally with teachers to gain further perspective on the themes emerging from the observations. The author perceived children to behave naturally at her presence, which the teachers confirmed it by commenting that children were very used to the presence of outside visitors as they were often observed by investigators interested in this new school structure.

Finally, with the guidance of school association coordinators, we gathered such documents as the school manifesto, protocols, schedules, students' artifacts, and artifacts that emerged during a field trip.

The data collection process started after receiving Human Subject Ethical Approval 28620816/06, and the consent of all participants. For the class observations, parents' written consent and students' oral assent were obtained.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data were subjected to content analysis. We applied inductive coding (Thomas, 2006) to identify themes emerging from the raw data without predetermined structuring. Then, we triangulated the data across different sources and data collection methods. Lastly, both authors coded subsamples of interview transcripts and observational field notes together. The authors started with initial inductive coding until patterns and major themes emerged. The authors frequently met to discuss the codes and ensure coding agreement before the reporting. Ultimately, the thick data was reduced under two major themes: *the organizational level* and *the pedagogical level*.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Several measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the study by addressing transferability, credibility, and dependability of the study.

For transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), all teachers were interviewed, and all classes were observed by the same researcher to include a holistic range of data to capture maximum variation of experiences and perspectives. The non-participant observation continued for a month during which the researcher participated in daily life activities such as breakfast, circles, break sessions at teachers' room, and learning activities in the classroom to establish connection and rapport with the participants. Thick

descriptions of the findings and illustrative direct participants quotes were selected to make the themes more comprehensible that ultimately aimed to enable the findings transferable to other alternative school settings. Furthermore, discussions were added that referred to the complexity that emerged from the centralized systems and potential effective responses to these complexities in the light of similar alternative schooling movements in the world.

For credibility and dependability (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011), the data and methods were triangulated. The reports from different teachers and findings from observations, interviews, and documents were compared to determine areas of agreement as well as areas of divergence. These points of convergences and discrepancies were explicitly reported in the results section. The two authors conferred, frequently referring to the raw data, until they reached a common agreement on naming the codes and major themes before making final decisions.

## Findings

We organized the emergent themes under two sections as findings at the 1) organizational level and 2) pedagogical level. The themes that emerged at the organizational level were the values democratic governance and sense of community, with the associated challenges of blurry roles, power struggles, and excessive time spent reaching consensus. At the pedagogical level, the themes that emerged were the values holistic education and teacher and child autonomy, with the associated challenges of lack of pedagogical guidance (Table 2). We discuss each theme below.

**Table 2.** Summary of Findings

	Values	Challenges
<b>Organizational Level</b>	Democratic governance	Blurry roles and power struggles
	Sense of community	Excessive time spent on reaching consensus
<b>Pedagogical Level</b>	Holistic education	Lack of pedagogical guidance
	Teacher and child autonomy	
	Alternative instructional activities	
	School parliament	
	Circles	
	Personal learning plan	
	Workshops	

### 1. Findings at the Organizational Level

#### Values

**Democratic governance.** A major factor that brought the teachers and the administrator under the roof of Anatolia Alternative Elementary School was seeking an alternative to the *top-down* mainstream education system in which the decisions are made without teacher, student, or parent input. All viewed democratic governance as the most important organizational value of the school. The teachers had prior experience working in private mainstream schools, which they described with such adjectives as *artificial, mechanical, fake, competitive, and restrictive*. Berna shared an anecdote about her previous workplace, at which the school manager was misinforming parents about students' activities at the school:

It was an environment in which the children were playing in mud until evening. Just before they left school, their clothes were cleaned and their hair groomed for their parents. This did not align with my moral values [...]. Also, as a teacher, you are under very intense administrative pressure. There are powers above you, and you have to do everything they say. You have to pretend that you did tasks you did not do, or otherwise, you will be reprimanded.

The other teachers shared similar negative sentiments about their previous workplaces, expressing feelings of *frustration, stress, and violation of their moral values*. Like Woods and Woods (2012), they viewed a democratic school system, in which all members were equal co-creators of their environment, as a gateway to a more productive teaching and learning ambience. This type of participation resulted from adherence to two principles: *horizontal organizational structure* and *consensus-based decision-making processes*. The horizontal organizational structure of the school was apparent in various ways. The equitability of relationships was evident in the daily communication style. For example, children called their teachers by their first names, which is highly untypical of Turkish culture, in which calling elders by their first names is usually considered disrespectful. Also, administrative decisions were made collectively by all stakeholders through specialized commissions and a school parliament. No individual, including the school manager, held decisive power. Rather, the school manager acted as a coordinator between the parents and the teachers, communicating the expectations of each party to the other. One of the kindergarten teachers, Berna, reflected upon how the lack of hierarchical authority impacted her teaching:

The fact that there is not a strict hierarchical relationship is something that makes you much safer here. You don't do anything based on fear. You have no concern that your manager will be angry, you have no concern that you will have to give him an account. There is peace in a place where there is no anxiety. And peace naturally gives you confidence in yourself, in discovering new areas, and in learning new things.

The horizontal structure gave Berna self-confidence, and in return, she felt encouraged to explore new pedagogical practices without fearing reprisals.

Further, the collective decision-making process in school commissions, parliament, and classrooms was characterized by consensus, not the majority of votes. In the weekly school parliament, school related issues were discussed by children, teachers, and the school manager together. As in Summerhill free school (Neill, 1960) a child's perspective carried the same weight as the school manager's. Children were also decision-makers in conflicts that arose in their classrooms. The teachers themselves did not suggest a solution, but they facilitated children's decision-making processes by providing feedback, for example, "We tried this before, and it did not work." "Are you sure you want to take responsibility for managing your friends?" "Okay, here are your suggestions. Does this solution work for everybody?" By reminding children of what they needed to take into consideration, the teachers helped them develop problem-solving strategies.

The children held the teachers accountable by reminding them of democratic values. For example, when three children were trying to bring a dog into the schoolyard, Kemal, who was monitoring the schoolyard, prevented them, saying that pets were not allowed on the school grounds. The children challenged Kemal by saying that he could not make this decision by himself. The issue was brought to the parliament circle. After asking for a turn to speak, Kemal gave his perspective: "They were right. I cannot give make the decision alone. However, they cannot make this decision alone, either. We need to make the decision here all together." As this incident exemplifies, democratic values such as collective decision-making, horizontal relationships, consensus, and equity among all stakeholders were internalized by school members as shown through their daily actions.

**Sense of community.** An important characteristic of a community is a common mission shared by all members of the group, who take responsibility to make the organization work (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). If people have a sense of community, they commit to meeting each other's needs and share a feeling of belonging (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The quality of their interactions, including caring attitudes and mutual trust, is crucial for maintaining this sense of community. (Hiatt-Michael, 2001).

In the school, the members exhibited care for each other by sharing responsibility for the well-being and growth of each member and often went beyond the requirements of their primary roles to support the community's needs. For example, a teacher might care for a child when the parent needs to go away for the weekend; an English-speaking child might tutor her teacher during a break time rather

than vice versa; another child might lead yoga sessions during the break time to relieve the stress of both children and the teachers; if one teacher didn't feel well, another would teach her class. At the same time, personal boundaries were respected, and individuals were not forced to go beyond their required roles. These collegial relationships among the members of the school also facilitated dealing with disagreements. As Kemal expressed:

We can have a drink with parents somewhere. They can come to my apartment. [...] On the school management board, you can clash with a parent because we need to decide on a matter. But once the meeting is over, we walk out side by side in solidarity because we have another relationship.

A similar dynamic also existed among teacher-child relationships. As Hulya expressed, even when children had disputes with their teachers at the end of the day, the disputes did not carry over to the next morning. Overall, stakeholders voluntarily exceeded the traditional boundaries of their roles at the workplace by showing care, solidarity, and support for each other, on the other hand, the individual boundaries were respected, which transformed the school into a family-type atmosphere. This family-type atmosphere, in return, positively influenced conflict management among the members.

#### *Challenges*

***Blurry roles and power struggles.*** In relation to this permeability of role boundaries, the school's cooperative organizational structure, which fostered family-like informal interrelationships, made the focus on professional relationships fuzzy, which sometimes resulted in conflict in parent-teacher and child-teacher relationships.

Because parents had an active role in the hiring of the teachers through participation in specialized commissions, they had dual status as primary caretakers of their children and employers of the teachers. A novice teacher, Şeyma, reported her confusion with this situation: "Sometimes hats can get mixed. Are you the parent of the child I am teaching, or are you part of the cooperative that employed me? With which identity do you say to me what you are saying?" Similarly, other teachers complained about parents' interference with their teaching. According to some teachers, the parents' demands sometimes conflicted with the school's foundational values. For example, a parent asked the kindergarten teacher to take care of the child's school belongings, which the teacher viewed as violating one of the school's foundational values, which was to help the child develop autonomy. On the other hand, parents were also sometimes critical of the teacher's pedagogical approach when they found it too traditional.

A similar challenge was also apparent at child-teacher relationships. The lack of agreed-upon boundaries sometimes left both teachers and children in confusion, as Aylin, a third-grade teacher, noted:

We do not have definite rules and limits. It's all done on the individual's initiative [...] Let me give you an example: There is a high wall in the yard. Three teachers tell the children not to climb on the wall, that it's dangerous. But four of them allow it. And the kids are puzzled. Are they going to climb or not? Children don't know what to do. Teachers don't know what to say.

However, the ambiguity in certain cases did not mean that teachers never agreed about limits. For example, all teachers agreed that physical violence among children was undesirable and should be prevented. However, the problem arose as to *how* to discourage violent behavior without being authoritarian. One foundational value of the school was *positive discipline*, which all teachers learned about in professional development activities. According to the principle of positive discipline, children should not be disciplined through rewards or punishments. Instead, they should experience the natural consequences of their actions. Deniz, a second-grade teacher, explained the rationale for positive discipline:

When I give you candy for reading a book, I match two things that have no connection. Although there is an increase in reading books at first, there will be a decrease in the future because you will not be motivated internally but externally. To maintain the external motivation, if, for example, the award I give you today is candy, what will I give you tomorrow? I must increase the award all the time to keep that external motivation alive. Even if I increase it, that motivation disappears over time and reading goes down in the long run.

Thus, positive discipline builds upon the idea that children's internal motivation is triggered by the natural consequences of their own actions, which is more effective than relying on external motivators. However, in the case of undesirable behaviors, such as peer violence, teachers expressed that positive discipline left them clueless as to how to take effective action. As Deniz said, "Positive discipline tells you what not to do, but not what to do."

Another challenge in relation to positive discipline was the lack of shared understanding of what should constitute *a natural consequence* of undesirable behaviour and how to differentiate it from *punishment*. In one case, a child hit his teacher and therefore, was suspended from the school for one-week. While the teacher saw the sanction as *a natural consequence*, the child and parents saw it as *punishment*. Özge, one of the kindergarten teachers, illustrated this conflict:

All right, there is no reward or punishment at this school. But in life, we all live with the consequences of our behavior. It would be a very unrealistic situation if we didn't. If you do not greet a friend for three days, what happens on the fourth day is that she doesn't say hello to you. This wouldn't come off as punishment, right? Here in the school as well, children are required to see the consequences of their behavior. If you behave as if there is no consequence, then there will be no limits to what you do. Children should know their boundaries.

Özge's concern with the lack of clear behavioural boundaries was expressed by two other teachers. Kemal and Deniz believed that children are naturally inclined to force limits, which causes chaos in classroom management when there are no agreed-upon boundaries.

**Excessive time spent on reaching consensus.** Consensus-based democracy came with a cost. The stakeholders complained about the excessive time spent in commissions getting everyone to agree on an action that required immediate attention. For example, if a teacher needed a projector to use in her class, the decision of whether to buy one had to go through a time-consuming process in a commission. Two teachers, Berna and Deniz, exclaimed in separate interviews: "Sometimes I just wish there was a boss to tell people what to do!"

Consensus-based democracy entailed particular challenges for Meral, the school manager, who expressed that she often faced a dilemma when immediate action was needed, but she had to consume mental energy weighing her options: *Should she resolve the issue on her own, so the solution was reached faster? Or should she stick to the democratic values of the school and go through a consensus process with other school members?*

The findings at the organizational level suggest that the school's democratic governance system, in which relationships were flat and decision-making was based on consensus, created a family-like environment. This type of system encouraged openness and trust among its members and innovation in pedagogical methods. However, it also entailed power conflicts among teachers and parents and excessive time and energy spent on reaching consensus, with possible negative consequences when immediate action was called for.

## 2. Findings at the Pedagogical Level

### Values

**Holistic education.** The school put heavy emphasis on children's emotional and social development. Teachers described the mainstream education system as *competitive, test-driven, restrictive, and lacking meaningful learning* and the curriculum as *overloaded, lacking creativity, and lacking social and emotional learning*. As an alternative, the school offered a holistic curriculum with fewer hours devoted to academic classes. A school day was divided into academic classes in the morning and hands-on workshop activities in the afternoon. On the other hand, like any K-12 school in Turkey, the school had to follow the National Ministry of Education's (MoNE's) school curriculum. So how was the school able to afford fewer academic hours and extra-curricular activities while following the MoNE curriculum? The teachers contextualized the learning outcomes in the MoNE curriculum in the approaches and activities of the school. Kemal gave an account of this process:

In other schools, what do they do? They give out tests: "What shouldn't we do to other living things around us?" The options are "we shouldn't hurt them," "we shouldn't hit them," etc. We do not need this. First, we have circles and parliament. Listening, speaking, expressing oneself, you can observe them all there. This gives us an advantage. It is also a big advantage that we eat in the school. You achieve a lot of objectives there: Balanced diet, which vegetables and fruits to eat according to the season, etc. Many learning objectives are handled at the kitchen during lunchtime.

As Kemal noted, some academic objectives in MoNE curriculum were not explicitly covered as subjects but embedded in non-curricular activities and daily routines.

**Teacher and child autonomy.** Aligned with its democratic principles, the school highly valued both teacher and child autonomy. A teacher had the freedom to select learning objectives. For example, a MoNE learning objective is "The student knows that s/he needs animal food for nutrition." Kemal stated, "I don't want to be contradictory by first saying not to harm the cat in the garden and then saying that it's okay to eat the meat of a sheep or a cow. Naturally, I don't teach this learning objective." Similarly, instructional processes were determined by the individual teacher's perception of what alternative education is. Some teachers used trial and error methods until they found a method that worked, and some borrowed ideas from Western alternative educational approaches such as Reggio and Montessori.

The teachers encouraged child autonomy by providing children choices of what and how to learn. The learning process was self-directed in the sense that children planned and monitored their own learning. Children were also allowed to leave a class at any time they wanted to and attend lower or higher-grade classes instead. This process was monitored by the teachers (See Figure 1).

<p><b>CLASSROOM VISIT FORM</b></p> <p><b>DATE:</b></p> <p><b>NAME OF THE VISITING CHILD:</b></p> <p><b>THE VISITED CLASS:</b></p> <p><b>HOW MUCH TIME DID THE CHILD SPEND:</b></p> <p><b>ON WHICH CORNERS DID THE CHILD SPEND TIME AT:</b></p> <p><b>WHOM DID THE CHILD SPEND TIME WITH:</b></p> <p><b>ANYTHING YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE:</b></p> <p><b>THE PERSON WHO FILLS OUT THE FORM:</b></p> <p>Note: Classroom visit form reproduced and translated into English. A child can freely visit another class anytime during class time. The classroom teacher hands out the child this form to be filled out by the teacher of the class the child is visiting, so that the classroom teacher is informed how the child spent the time.</p>
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**Figure 1.** Classroom Visit Form

Does giving children such freedom cause them to make poor choices that are detrimental to their learning? The teachers suggested that the case was the opposite. For example, some kindergarten children chose to attend first-grade classes, and as a result, learned how to read. Kemal shared an intriguing account of a first-grade child who transferred to the school from a mainstream school:

Yesterday, he was doing maths during lunchtime. I had difficulty sending him to eat his lunch. He said, "I will finish my problems first!" He didn't want to study at his old school at all. He always had to be in the classroom. Here the child does not have to enter the classroom if he is not feeling well. We give him some space. He came and told me "Kemal, I don't want to study the lesson." We cannot force a thing that he does not want. After all, he is an individual. [So we had the following dialogue:]

K: "Okay, what do you want to do?"

S: "I want to paint."

K: "Then how about making the painting a bit thematic?"

S: "How so?"

K: "For example, you can do letters from the sky, or create a world of numbers."

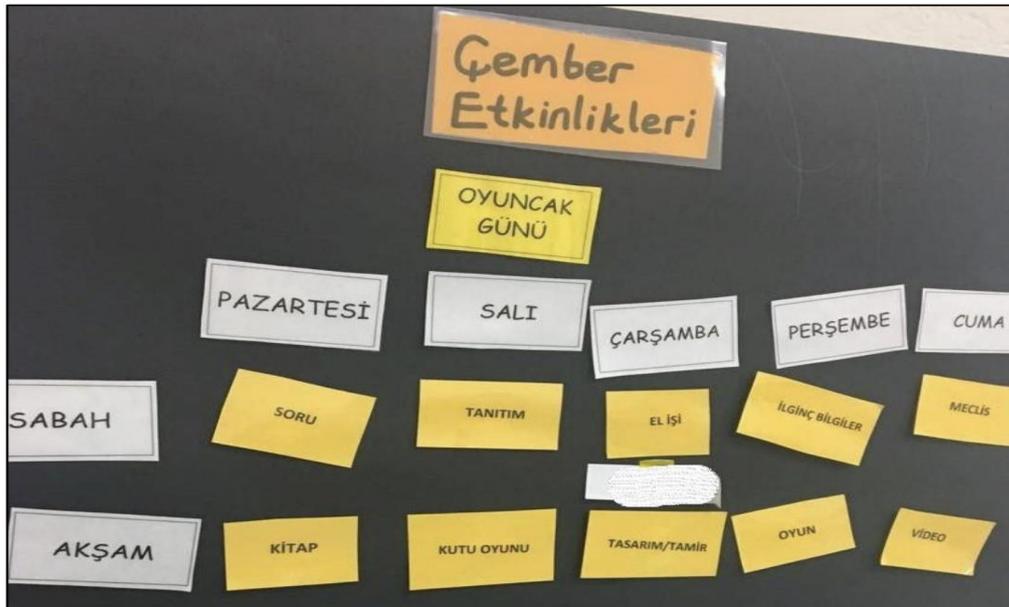
In fact, he does not want to study Turkish, but he wants to paint. He combines it with Turkish, and he does what he wants. At the end of two weeks, he started to trust [us]. He thinks "They don't do anything I don't want here, so I'm happy here." My guess is that at least. He wasn't coming to class at first. I never got mad. I never asked why he doesn't come to class, and I never told that him he needed to come into the class. He got bored after a while. He wanted to come in because his friends, other children etc. are there. He dealt with it himself without us forcing him to do anything.

According to Kemal's account, the child's attitude to school transformed positively when he was provided autonomy and freedom. Similarly, Waters (2017) argued that in such alternative schools, students are motivated to discover the possibilities of education as teachers show recognition and acceptance and work in the children's *zone of proximal development*. Similarly, the above account suggests that when Kemal acknowledged the child's boredom with class and interest in painting and further incorporated this interest into his teaching, the child developed motivation for learning and a positive attitude toward the school.

In sum, learning activities were embedded in a holistic learning approach with an emphasis on emotional and social learning; hands-on, learner-centered, and project-based activities; learner and teacher autonomy; and care for the community. Here, we briefly review the structure of weekly instructional activities to provide a more concrete sense of how these values were realized in practice.

**School parliament.** School parliaments aimed to provide an inclusive platform to discuss and solve school-wide problems with the direct participation of all members. Every Friday morning, all students, teachers, staff, and the school administrator formed a large circle at the sports hall. Before the parliament, discussion items were collected from each classroom by a *facilitator teacher*. In the parliament circle, everyone freely discussed. Whether they came from a student, teacher, or administrator, all ideas were treated equally and respectfully. A consensus was reached after the discussions, and the decision was announced by the facilitator teacher.

**Circles.** Circles aimed to improve self-regulation and emotional expression and foster a sense of community. The school day started and ended with a classroom circle. The morning circles centered on students' reflection on the previous day, their current emotions, and their individual learning plans for the rest of the school day. The evening circles centered around their reflection on the workshops. Circles were also used as a time to solve classroom conflicts and were followed by activities such as *asking questions, fun facts, handwork circle, free day*, etc. (See Figure 2).



Note. A caption of the pinboard about circle activities at the second grade. At the beginning of the morning, children first shared their emotions, plans, and reflections in the circle and then they were engaged with the pre-planned activities. The teacher's name was removed from the picture.

**Figure 2.** Circle Activities

**Personal learning plan.** After morning circles, morning hours were allocated to individual and personalized learning time. The process was guided by a personal weekly plan sheet in which each discipline was divided into activities in three levels. The first level corresponded to basic learning objectives and was obligatory for each student. The other two levels reinforced the attainments of the first level with more complex activities and higher-order learning objectives, and they were optional. Sometimes this section was left blank for students to create their own activities. Students were mostly motivated to complete all three levels. Even though teachers did not intend it, the *stars* at each level served as an external motivator for students to complete the attainments (See Figure 3).

Türkçe		Hedefim	Imza
★	"5N 1K Sorularına Cevap Arıyorum" Ece ile Efe Türkçe sayfa 58-59	★	
★★	Çalışma Kâğıdı - 1 "Karşılaştırma Bildiren İfadeler"	★★	
★★★	"Hikâye Yazıyorum" Hikâye başlatıcılarını kullanarak bir hikâye yaz.	★★★	

Note. A caption from a personal learning plan. The first 'star' was compulsory for all students, which included basic learning attainments. The other two focused on higher-order skills and were optional to complete. Even though the teachers had no such intention, the presence of stars served as external motivators: Students were eager to be able to fill in all stars by the end of the week.

**Figure 3.** Personal Weekly Plan

**Workshops:** Afternoon hours were allocated to workshops that aimed to provide a learning space in which students could work on multidisciplinary projects in mixed-aged groups. Multiple workshops were organized at the same time and every student was free to attend any workshop of their preference. Children were also able to lead their own workshop. They needed to plan ahead the name of their workshop, the equipment they needed, how many children they would accommodate, and where they wish to hold the workshop. After the completion of their workshop, they received feedback from the attendees (See Figures 4 and 5).

<b>I HAVE A WORKSHOP!</b>
<b>My name:</b>
<b>When will I open my workshop:</b>
<b>The name of my workshop:</b>
<b>What kind of equipment do I need:</b>
<b>The number of people that can attend:</b>
<b>Where will I hold my workshop:</b>
Note: Child-led workshop form reproduced and translated into English. If a child volunteered to lead a workshop, they were responsible for planning and conducting the workshop.

**Figure 4.** Workshop Form

Teachers expressed that the child-led workshops improved the volunteering children's self-confidence as the attendee children respected the leading child and took their instructions as seriously as instructions given by a teacher. It also helped the younger students to be oriented to the school by older children. Thus, the school culture of democracy, care for community, and child autonomy were transferred among children in the workshops.

ATÖLYEDE NELER HİSSETTİM?						
						
Sevinçli (joyful)	İsteksiz (reluctant)	Memnun (satisfied)	Sıkılmış (bored)	Meraklı (curious)	Hevesi kaçmış (disappointed)	
Adım-Soyadım: Katıldığım Atölye: Tarih:						

Note. Peer feedback form filled out at the end of child-led workshops. The figure illustrates the importance given to describing, identifying, and expressing emotions. The attendee children handed in the feedback paper to the volunteering child.

**Figure 5.** Workshop Peer Feedback Form

**Challenge: Lack of pedagogical guidance.** At the time of the study, as the Turkish Ministry of National Education funded only mainstream curriculum and instruction, resources for alternative teacher education had not been developed at the national level. As a result, the teachers carried the burden of devising alternative methods on their own, and some commented on their lack of prior teacher training or experiences that would prepare them for this challenging process. Two teachers expressed feelings of isolation and confusion in their attempts to create alternative pedagogy:

My first year was very enjoyable for me but also painful and complicated because I entered a process that I couldn't understand. [...] They put something in your hands called "alternative education" [and said] "You are going to do this!" Yes, I knew there is something called alternative education, but since my undergraduate years, I had not done any reading or research about it. I had not had any [relevant] experience or observations. [...] Alternative education was a blank slate to me. [...] Then I told myself, I will do whatever I understand what alternative education is. If it doesn't work, I will go back to the start and try it again. (Berna)

There is no program. No plans. You're trying to make things happen by yourself. Yes, there is a written text. But when you go into the class, you do not have anything to apply. There are foundational tenets. But there isn't any training or plan that targets what should be done or what kind of a school vision we have. Not much work has been done on those matters. In fact, they only created a frame. Inside that frame it is empty. Put the teachers and students in a class, and let's learn it all together on the road. This is what it is like. (Deniz)

These two accounts suggest that the school was facing the challenges of being a pioneer school. Even though the school model advocated particular values in its alternative education, teachers were not equipped with the adequate pedagogical knowledge and skills to implement them with confidence. *Alternative education* was a highly broad term with a spectrum of approaches, to which the teachers struggled to try to bring concrete meaning on their own.

The findings at the pedagogical level suggest that the school had a holistic curriculum with a focus on experiential, social, and emotional learning. It offered autonomy, choice, and freedom to teachers and children. However, this highly flexible and innovative system challenged the teachers as curriculum planners and instructional designers, which was a predictable result of operating as a pioneering school with no precedents in the national context.

## Discussion

We have presented Anatolia Alternative Elementary School as a unique case of a democratic parent-co-op alternative school in Turkey. While the school does not define itself within the boundaries of a certain alternative approach, the findings suggest that the school bears similarities to several alternative school models in the world. The learning environment is consistent with Freire's (1970) 'problem-posing' concept which suggests that meaningful learning occurs only through active inquiry, invention, and reflection. The flattened organization structure and alternative activities such as circles, workshops, and school parliaments encouraged children and teachers to constantly reflect on their activities and openly discuss their emotions and opinions. As in Waldorf, Montessori, and Reggio schools, students are active agents of their development, and parents are educational partners (Pope, 2002); also its democratic governance structure resembles free and democratic school movements (Facer, Thorpe, & Shaw, 2012; Woodin, 2012; Woods & Woods, 2012). We hope findings to be of both local and international relevance to researchers and practitioners all around the world who are interested in alternative schools.

Below we discuss the main findings of the study in relation to promises and challenges of the school model and suggest future directions for research. Under each subcategory, we first discuss how findings confirm, challenge, or extend the prior research. Second, we make suggestions to policymakers and practitioners based on our interpretation of the results in the light of our reading of prior literature. Finally, we conclude with directions for future research.

### *Promises of the School Model*

Typical of progressive alternative schools, the school provided a holistic learning environment in which emotional and social learning processes were considered as at least as important as cognitive domains. One critical issue concerning alternative schools is whether the holistic approach poses disadvantages to students' academic development by not exposing them to the full workload of mainstream schools. An argument for holistic approach in alternative schools is that focus on social and emotional learning affects academic development positively (Waters, 2017). In support of this view, basic learning research provides evidence that negative emotions like anxiety and worry can undermine learning, and people work harder to learn the content they are emotionally interested in (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). While longitudinal comparative research is needed to understand how alternative schooling impacts learners' academic development compared to mainstream schools, our findings at least suggest that freedom and autonomy positively influenced some children's motivation for and pace of learning and in some cases completely transformed the child's attitude toward schooling in a positive direction.

The findings suggest important implications for policy making processes about mainstream schools at the national level. Democratic schools' values are of interest not only to parents who look for alternatives to mainstream education. According to the UN's 2030 agenda for sustainable development (UN, 2014), one crucial goal by 2030 is to provide all learners with education that promotes human rights, a culture of peace, and pluralism. To this end, teacher education programs should align pre-and in-service teachers with these 21st-century values. The Anatolia Alternative Elementary School's democratic, egalitarian, and pluralistic structure can serve as one model to demonstrate these values in teacher education. While the teachers in this study held different views about how free and autonomous the children should be, and they sometimes complained about the time-consuming nature of democratic decision-making processes, they all shared the view that a school culture should promote communication, nonviolent negotiation of disputes, and curricular and instructional processes that value teacher and learner input more than traditional schools do. Teachers reported positive motivational effects of this type of environment, which, in turn, provided them with the autonomy and

confidence to try out innovative instructional approaches. These democratic practices can also be applied in mainstream schools.

Considering that the school was operating in a highly centralized education system, a major challenge to its pedagogical processes was that, as a pioneer alternative school in Turkey, it began with no previous national models of alternative elementary education. Whereas its unique structure encouraged creativity and freedom, it also created uncertainty and confusion in terms of curriculum and instructional planning. At the time of data collection for this study, the school had been operating for only four years. Since then, newer cooperative schools with the same structure have been formed in different cities. Thus, at the time of this writing, the school has already provided a model for other alternative schools. In alternative schools, teachers need time to practice newly learned skills, receive feedback, collaborate, study data, and adjust their teaching repertoires (George, White, & Schlaffer, 2007). With further maturation and cultural accumulation over time, *Anatolia Alternative Elementary School* and the model it provides has the potential to evolve to be more effective and provide solutions to the challenges of the early years.

#### *Parents' Role in Decision-making Processes*

Another critical finding is that parents as the owners of the capital sometimes instigated a power conflict with the teachers, which is consistent with earlier findings from British parent co-op free schools (Firestone, 1977) and alternative schools in the United States (Hiatt-Michael, 2001). In the current study, all teachers expressed that they wish full autonomy in educational decision-making and instructional processes. It should be noted that our findings might be biased in favour of teachers' views as we did not collect data from parents. In addition, our review of alternative schools suggest that the teachers' expectation of full autonomy might not be realistic considering the school's special organizational structure, and full autonomy is not consistent with important prior alternative school models and practices. For instance, Reggio Emilia alternative schools invite parents to be actively involved in school policy, curricular planning, and evaluation (New, 1999); New Tech schools in the US involve parents in the planning of noncognitive aspects of learning (Bradley-Levine & Mosier, 2017); and Australian alternative schools invite suggestions from parents on school issues. As Herman and Yeh (1980) showed in their early work, parent involvement can help the school be more sensitive to the children's needs and might even help relieve teachers by transferring some responsibility from school to the parents.

The administrator acted as a messenger who bridged communications between parents and teachers, two parties who were often in conflict. Previous literature affirms that the administrator's role as an effective leader is highly critical for the sustainability of alternative and democratic schools. Hiatt-Michael (2001) found that, despite a flat structure, in successful alternative schools, the school manager acted as a leader who kept all constituents focused on their common mission and the importance of working for the greater good of the community. *An effective school leader*, in this context, is described as one who nurtures and encourages all members of the community to perform at their utmost capacity to work for both their individual goals and the good of the organization. Such a leader shares power, acknowledges ideas implemented by community members, emphasizes the significance of individuals and their work to the organization, and exhibits concern and care for each member. These previous findings suggest that the administrator should go beyond her role as a *bridge* between parents and teachers and act as a *leader* for effective collaboration grounded on the shared moral values of the school (Hiatt-Michael, 2001).

### ***Discipline Issues***

Their flat school structure and democratic ideals do not completely protect alternative schools from the problems of adversarial relationships, bullying, and interpersonal conflict that occur in all schools (Tyner-Mullings, 2012). Our findings suggest that the school faces disciplinary issues. On the contrary, in their study of Australian alternative schools, TeRiele, Mills, McGregor, and Baroutsis (2017) argued that the positive culture, i.e., respectful, trustful, caring, inclusive, and flexible relationships in these schools, makes students want to attend the school. According to the authors, this affective dimension of schooling makes punitive behavior management redundant. Based on our findings, we suggest that this is an overly optimistic view of the beneficial effects of positive culture in alternative schooling as the school in our case study exhibited serious disciplinary issues despite attempts to adhere to the values TeRiele and colleagues promoted. While we do not claim that our case can be generalized to all alternative schools, we caution against the expectations that simply replacing the hierarchical structure with horizontal relationships will magically ensure peace in a school. On the contrary, previous research suggests that peace in the school culture can be sustained only through explicit commitment to it and constant and conscious efforts by all members, as we discuss next.

An important pedagogical approach in the school was *positive discipline*. In order to understand the source of this pedagogical approach, we conducted a literature review. While there were conceptual frameworks to explain the concept (Durrant, 2007; Nelsen, 1996; Strahan, Cope, Hundley, & Faircloth, 2005), we were not able to find empirical evidence that supports the benefits of positive discipline, nor did the current case provide any support for its benefits. Indeed, our findings suggest that the positive discipline approach is not always helpful and is likely to be detrimental in fostering a desirable classroom and school culture. It often creates unintended effects by allowing disruptive and even violent behaviour as there are no effective sanctions to discourage it, which results in chaos and hostility. What, then, should be done? Based on prior empirical investigations of alternative schools that successfully sustained their mission (George et al., 2007), we believe that school-wide boundaries of the vision and expectations should be established and consistently maintained; positive behaviour should be recognized, and sanctions for rule-violating behaviour should be imposed.

### ***Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research***

The current study contributes to the literature on alternative education in the context of Turkey as an empirical investigation of how a pioneering democratic and alternative education model is implemented, which is based on observations in the field, in-depth interviews of the teachers and the manager, and artifacts emerging from innovative practices. It is important to study cases of organizational innovation by exploring the contexts, contents, and processes of change over time (Pettigrew et al., 2001). The current study is based on data collected over two months. Future studies should extend the current work by longitudinal fieldwork. A longitudinal study can reveal more insights into a school's organizational, curricular and instructional development over time.

An important concern about such an alternative school model is whether it can sustain its mission in the Turkish education system, in which curricular and instructional activities are heavily influenced and constrained by standardized exams. The current study does not shed light on this issue. The school operated at only K-4 levels, at which there are no standardized exams for which students should be prepared; therefore, the national curricula provided the flexibility that allowed a holistic educational approach, but only in the early grades. Future research should investigate how alternative practices operate at higher grade levels in which students typically are expected to be prepared for national examinations.

Furthermore, the external context, i.e., history, structure, cultures, and power at the state or national level affect organizational innovations (Pettigrew et al., 2001), especially, a school model that tries to align yet struggle with the centralized. The ultimate aim of schools like the Anatolia Elementary Alternative School is to achieve transformation of their society into a more democratic, pluralist, and egalitarian structure. Our findings suggest that these values are largely internalized by the stakeholders in alternative education and mostly protected within the borders of the school. Future research investigating the experiences of the stakeholders with out-of-school influences can be helpful for understanding the phenomena of educational transformation, societal change, and cultural clash in a broader context.

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