WHAT DID THE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS LEARN
FROM THE PANDEMIC IN TURKEY?
EXPERIENCES DURING THE PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to examine the experiences of school principals in Turkey during the pandemic. The fact that school principals have taken on an active role as guiding the school shareholders in coping with the crisis was the motive for focusing on their experiences. The study based on a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data was collected by way of a focus group interviews. As is the case globally, the pandemic has led to feelings of panic, fear and uncertainty among the people in Turkey. Immediate decisions without shareholder participation and which conflict with each other were taken during the crisis period. In this regard, even though the expectations are not high, establishing local decision-making units and managing them efficiently, developing parent training programs and increasing the technological competence levels, focus on techno-pedagogic competencies on the part of institutions responsible from training and educating teachers and establishing effective communication and decision mechanisms among the school shareholders are among the advancements expected for the post-pandemic period.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has made a deep impact and reshaped social, cultural, economic, and political life on a global scale. It can be predicted that this impact will continue in all areas in the future as is the case in the present. Education and schools are among the institutions that have been affected the most from the pandemic. Many studies have been conducted in international (Azorin, 2020; Beauchamp, Hulme, Clarke, Hamilton and Harvey, 2021; Harris, 2020; Harris and Jones, 2020; Netolicky, 2020) and national literature (Akyavuz and Çakın; 2020; Aytaç, 2020; Çakın and Akyavuz, 2020; Keleş, Atay and Karanfil, 2020; Taşar, 2021) to understand the reflections of the pandemic affecting schools.

Past criticisms on the school have increased with the pandemic. These criticisms on the school focus mostly on statements that the school has diverted from its essential functions thus failing to provide a fair, equal and quality education to all individuals. Schools have been shut down globally during this period forcing school principals and education systems to face dire problems. School principals have directly encountered these problems because schools are the institutions where education policies are implemented. School principals have on the one hand tried to inform the parents, students and teachers on the current situation while on the other hand they have strived to solve many problems by themselves. The problems that school principals faced during this period, the challenges, solution suggestions along with the evaluation of what has been learned during this period as well as the lessons that can be drawn comprise the primary subject of the present

study. The poor have always been the greatest victims of crises. They have again been the social group that has been affected the most from the pandemic which made problems such as social justice in education, social equality and equal opportunity more visible. It has thus gained significant importance to examine the priorities of the school principals during the time of crisis, their strategies as well as the lessons that can be drawn from this crisis. In this context, Smith and Riley (2010) was taken as the theoretical basis. According to the authors in times of crisis, the critical qualities of effective leadership are the ability to deal with uncertainty; determination to question events in new and insightful ways; flexible and quick to react and accept change when necessary; believing that you can deal with the crisis as a team; perseverance, a willingness to take risks and bend the 'rules' when necessary. This study focused on the extent to which school principals were able to manage the process by using their effective leadership characteristics in the crisis period. The aim of the study was to examine the experiences of school principals in Turkey during the pandemic. In this context, the following questions were answered in the study:

1. How did school principals define the pandemic?

2. What do they think about social justice-accessibility and hierarchical disconnection during the pandemic?

3. What did the principals learn from the pandemic: problems, their priorities, and accomplishments during the process?

METHODOLOGY

What Do They Think That They Accomplished?

The present study focuses on how school principals experience the crisis that resulted with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that school principals have taken on an active role as guiding the school shareholders in coping with the crisis was the motive for focusing on their experiences. The study based on a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected by way of focus group interviews rather than individual because of the presence of common problems and the fact that each principal experienced the crisis with the same intensity. Thus, school principals have found the opportunity to make sense of their own experiences through the experiences of others.

The participants were comprised of pre-school, primary school, secondary school and high school principals. In addition, the participants were selected from among individuals with graduate level education in the field of education management considering that they may be better at reading the current situation. The process was continued with eight participants since the data were acquired via focus group interview. Table 1 presents the gender and experience of the participants as well as school type and the defining abbreviations.

Table 1

School Principal Characteristics

Gender	Year in the role	School type	School Principal ID
Female	14	Preschool	PS1
Male	8	Primary	P1
Female	24	High school	HS1
Female	8	Primary	P2
Female	7	Secondary	S1
Male	19	Primary	P3
Male	14	Primary	P4
Male	8	Secondary	S2

In order to form a group that is balanced with regard to gender, four female and four male school principals were included in the study from different school types and with different professional experiences.

What Did The Principals Learn from The Pandemic?

The principals were informed by way of an invitational e-mail as to the objective of the study, how the data will be acquired, how long the interviews will last and how they will be conducted in addition to the ethical principles to be followed. Interviews were planned with the invited school principals following their declarations of voluntariness with at least one week in between each focus group interview. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom software since face-to-face interviews were not possible due to the pandemic measures. Video recordings were taken for all interviews.

Focus group interviews were conducted in three sessions. The reason for this is that separate sessions are needed in order to understand separately the school principals' first pandemic experiences, their experiences during the process, and how they are currently evaluating with a holistic perspective. During the first interview, the researchers informed the school principals on the focus group interview method and the process in general. One of the researchers took on the role of a moderator and another researcher became the reporter, which was not changed throughout the study.

The first interview lasted 102 minutes. The process from the first COVID-19 case in Turkey on March 11 up to the time when it was decided to switch to distance education at schools was examined during the first interview. The school principals were asked to share their emotions, expectations, concerns, and experiences when they were preparing their schools for the new situation. The second interview lasted 72 minutes. The focus during this interview was on the priorities of the school principals, what they could and could not succeed as well as what they did for disadvantaged students with regard to social justice. The final focus group study focused on the opinions of the school principals on the reflections of COVID-19 19 on education and the changes that the school concept went through. This interview lasted 87 minutes. Topics from previous interviews were shared prior to this interview, approvals of the participants were obtained and thus it was ensured that they could focus on opinions related with the effects of the pandemic.

Video recordings were transcribed by the researchers after which content analysis method was used by each researcher to reach the acquired findings by way of controlling the fit indices between each topic and codes.

FINDINGS

How Did School Principals Define the Pandemic?

School principals generally interpret the pandemic negatively. Words such as crisis, confusion, chaos, panic, distress, anxiety, and fear of death, concern, uncertainty, disconnection, and miscommunication are among those that school principals used for defining the pandemic process. Even though negative words have generally been used to define the pandemic, school principals have also emphasized its positive aspects such as cooperative learning, achievement and movement.

> "The process was very tiresome, but it also taught us a lot. To move together…
> Who will do what in which order? In addition, it also taught us to take rapid
> decisions and implement them." (HS1)

> "The process provided us with significant experience. (P2)

In general, school principals believe that the pandemic has been managed well in terms of health and education and that the process transformed the school principals into leaders. This opinion was based on the fact that the school principals felt more at ease with regard to autonomy and taking initiative at their workplace due to the panic and uncertainty present in times of crisis.

Social Justice and Accessibility during the Pandemic

The importance of the socio-economic and cultural level of the parents became more apparent during the pandemic with regard to the students' access to education. In other words, this inequality continued to increase during the pandemic. Another subject that school principals emphasize in relation with social justice and accessibility was losing the students whom they had drawn back to school after long periods of absence. Similarly, the communication issues experienced with Syrian parents prior to the pandemic deepened even further during this period. The opinions of school principals on these issues are presented below:

> "We experienced the disadvantages of disadvantageous regions even further
> during this period" (P3)

> "Some students could attend the lessons only when their fathers came back home.
> To tell the truth, we could not reach Syrian parents and children. We failed to
> reach them." (PS1)

> On the other hand, a school principal at one of the advantageous schools in an
> advantageous region (S2) stated that; "Distance education is going good at their
> school compared with other schools because they have more access to digital
> amenities". The opportunity gap observed between the students was especially
> dominant in schools at neighborhoods where there are families from different
> socio-economic backgrounds.

Hierarchical Disconnection

The decisions taken by politicians and bureaucrats during the pandemic were declared simultaneously to all schools and the society. Indeed, the official declarations to the schools were made after the public was notified.

> "We as school principals learned everything from the television at the same time
> with the rest of the public. We had no difference. But people expected us to know
> beforehand since we are school principals." (P2)

"Delays in the correspondence from the Ministry left us in the dark regarding how we should behave." (HS1)

School principals stated that there were misconnections with superior units. Regarding this disconnection, the school principals stated that, "they make their decisions not according to a certain program but based on their educator reflexes through comparisons with what is done at different schools" (PS1).

What Were Their Priorities During the Process?

The priorities of the school principals during the process can be summarized in general as: making up for shortages related with distance education at their schools, establishing coordination between the student-teacher and parents, forwarding the information provided by the Ministry to the related individuals in a timely manner, keeping teacher motivation high and trying to establish equality of opportunity among the students. Some school principals (P1, P4) organized meetings prior to the pandemic for identifying the predictions of the teachers and to raise awareness. Therefore, it can be understood that the priority of the school principals in the struggle against the pandemic is taking the support of teachers. In addition to informing the students about the pandemic, it was aimed during these meetings to design the required digital media which will be used to communicate with the parents considering that they will be very active during this period. It can be indicated that the priorities during this period were teacher support, continuous communication with the parents and raising awareness on the pandemic. The participant opinions on the priorities of school principals are presented below:

"We used the motto 'No cases, Yes Measures' and held a meeting for a disease we do not know about" (P1)

"Since the only source of communication will be electronic, all communication groups were made active including the parents for establishing 100% communication." (P4)

"One of our priorities was to establish an active teacher-parent communication." (P1)

"Our priority during this period was the teachers. We considered teachers as the source of motivation because they were the ones who established the connection with the parents." (S1)

The learning habits of the students were tried to be kept fresh in Turkey during the pandemic. "Conducting a question-response survey via WhatsApp, communicating with the students one by one, and sharing the photos of students watching EBA TV at the school website after receiving the required approvals." (P1)

Problems Encountered During the Process

The school principals stated the lack of a consensus on implementation as the first problem they encountered during the pandemic. It was indicated that there was no consensus on implementation among the Provincial/District Directorates of National Education, school types and schools. It was understood that the lack of a consensus on implementation was apparent in the additional course fees paid to the teachers and pandemic related measures. The lack of a consensus on implementation

regarding additional course fees turned out to be a significant issue when it was considered that teacher motivation was among the priorities of one of the school principals.

> "There may be different additional course implementation at two different districts of a province. Some of our teachers did not receive extra payment even though they taught extra courses. (PS3)"

> "Conflicts emerged between administration-teachers because of the differences in implementation among schools"

> [because there was no consensus of implementation] "Our colleagues requested not the most accurate but the highest additional course fees. (PS1)

> "Sometimes we would come together as 5 school principals and tried to understand what is meant by the received correspondences." (P1)

Technical insufficiencies emerged as another problem. The education information network established by the Ministry turned out to be insufficient for the general public which resulted in disconnections. In addition, live courses could not be planned for each course considering that the system will not be able to meet the demand. This was also the source of the problem of additional courses among the teachers related with technical insufficiencies. ZOOM software was started to be used by the Ministry during the first weeks of the pandemic which was followed by digital security concerns when there were news indicating that personal information may be accessed in ZOOM software. The hardware requirement of the teachers also became apparent together with the students. Indicating the teacher who used the refrigerator as a white board turned out to be a plain indicator of the hardware requirement of the teachers. It was understood that majority of the students and teachers do not have smart devices for joining live courses or that they cannot use them.

Another problem was the increase in the educational gap of disadvantageous and absent students. With the onset of the pandemic, it has become even more difficult to close this gap. The limited internet access of disadvantageous students has led to an increase in the education gap during the pandemic.

School principals stated that the centralistic structure of the Ministry of National Education led them feel the lack of an effective local commission during the pandemic. Similarly, they indicated that the delays in official correspondence resulting from the hierarchical structure related with the centralistic structure as another problem. In addition, school principals put forth that the decisions taken do not have solid foundations, that they are disconnected from the field and that they have been taken with a small group of individuals.

School principals have experienced Turkey-specific problems in two different subjects. One of these was putting into effect the requirement for obtaining a certification in order to improve the hygiene conditions of schools, injection prevention and control processes within the scope of the "Clean School" campaign. Even though the Ministry has taken an important step in the struggle against the pandemic, school principals have been left to face with generating self-revenue under pandemic conditions.

> "How will it make the school ready in terms of mask-distance-hygiene. We experienced significant financial issues." (HS1)

Whereas the second problem was the fact that school principals were forced to take part in filiation teams. School principals worked in these teams without any additional payment, faced with the risk of COVID contact and with thoughts that they are being used as filler materials by performing duties that require low formation. Taking part in the filiation team has also resulted in undesired circumstances on the part of school principals such as the distribution of their personal communication information and entrance to private space.

Because we were in the filiation team] all the neighborhoods learned our personal phone number when we were not even giving it out to our students. (PS1)

What do they think that they accomplished?

Even though school principals stated their opinions on the problems related with being in the filiation team, they were of the opinion that they were successful in pioneering to the public during the pandemic. Some examples on the opinions of school principals on this subject:

This [pandemic] was at first considered to be the problem of healthcare workers, we are public workers… over time I understood that the people in my neighborhood really have no idea what is going on. (HS1)

School principals were also of the opinion that they were good at establishing communication between the school shareholders. A type of communication based on taking initiatives was adopted which enabled them to fill the gap between the information received from the Ministry and the movement area of the teachers. Teacher motivation was kept continuously high thinking that the burden of the pandemic will be on the shoulders of the teachers.

"Teachers were the priority during the process. We considered them as the source of motivation because they were the ones who established communication with the parents. We pulled through with minimum psychological damage." (S1)

"We conducted effective meetings on how the process should be managed. The experience of our guidance teachers and the fact that they have educated themselves on these subjects made a positive impact on the parents. Our guidance teachers put in significant efforts especially with regard to the socialization of small children, using technological devices etc." (P3)

Schools integrated more with the community by extending out of the school campuses. In this regard, it can be stated that the social function of the school stood out more.

"We learned that we have to educate not only the students but also the public." (HS1)

"We saw that the teachers increased visits to the parents. At least all our teachers had the chance to see the environment where our students live, their neighborhood relations, family environment, financial states and their study environments at their homes." (P1)

What did the Principals Learn from the Pandemic?

School principals indicated that the pandemic helped them to re-question concepts such as education, school, and student. School principals are of the opinion that the pandemic made it apparent that there is a need for significant structural change. Opinions of school principals on this subject:

> "It seems that the perspective towards education will change completely." (P3)

> "I think that school principals should improve themselves continuously and receive training in order to cope with crises. I am thinking about graduate studies, but they should advance as far as they can." (PS1)

> "I am of the opinion that the hybrid model will continue to be used even if the pandemic is over. Because the number of students is very high in Turkey and the classrooms are very crowded." (S1)

> "It is important to put into effect on-site management rather than central management." (P3)

In addition to the aforementioned major structural changes, the school principals have emphasized the need to transform schools into spaces with more participation and communication.

> "Our schools have to become places with intensive communication based on cooperation." (P4)

Because they are of the opinion that distance learning will continue, it is indicated that the teachers should be prepared for the profession better equipped with technological competencies and that they should also be supported throughout their professional lives. In other words, the necessity on the teachers' part to reach techno-pedagogic competence has been emphasized.

> "I think that our teachers are insufficient from a technological perspective for the schools of today and tomorrow. The schools of the future and universities that educate teachers should be restructured." (P4)

The importance of parental support has been understood once again during the rapid transition to distance education with the onset of the pandemic. The shift of schools to homes has made the role of parents in education more distinct. In this regard, the school principals are of the opinion that parental trainings should receive more attention starting with the parents of pre-school children.

> "Trainings on sewing, embroidery, and furnishing should be provided to housewives, mothers, parents at public training centers starting with the parents of pre-school children. It is especially important to include mothers in education." (PS1)

> "We should utilize the parents as teachers as well. Let us first transfer the knowledge to them because it is easier to do so since we are dealing with very small children." (P4)

It is possible to summarize the suggestions of school principals on the future as; school design based on communication and cooperation, teachers with techno-pedagogic attributes in addition to other requirements, actively involved parents and school-parent cooperation. On the other hand, some

school principals have stated that the lessons learned during the pandemic will be forgotten very quickly afterwards and that everything will go as it was beforehand.

> "I am of the opinion that the de-schooling public discourse that has gone into effect together with the pandemic is like a fantasy for this day and age that we live in and for the near future. Because we all stalled during this period. I think that the schools will preserve their positions in the near future, in three-five or ten years." (P4)

It seems as if after the pandemic everything will continue as it was before. (P3)

> "Distance education may be continued in some unexpected cases. I do not think that full-time distance education or distance education for some courses will be beneficial. I also think that it will be a dream." (P1)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As is the case globally, the pandemic has led to feelings of panic, fear and uncertainty among the people in Turkey. Similar to the meanings of the aforementioned words, Azorín (2020) defined the pandemic as a 'supernova' that shook the texture of education. Immediate decisions without shareholder participation and which conflict with each other were taken during the crisis period. The fact that the government did not include the school principals and teachers in the decision-making process led to hierarchical disconnections. It was indicated in a study carried out in the United Kingdom by Beauchamp et al. (2021) that it was quite problematic for the ministers to share the related decisions directly with the media prior to informing the schools. As put forth by Schmidt and Groeneveld (2019), higher management focused on emergency decision making processes during the crisis. Processes for informing and involving in the decision-making process were neglected. Hence, this is an indication that the hierarchical communication did not function during the pandemic period. Actually, vertical top-down communication may sometimes be preferred for its speed despite its inefficiency with regard to the professional satisfactions of shareholders. However, it was also insufficient in speed during the pandemic period coupled with its already existing negativities.

The most important acquisition from the period was the fact that it transformed school principals into crisis leaders. Because the school principals had to rapidly put into effect the decisions declared by the government and the Ministry Education while coping with problems such as receiving the support of teachers and parents and keeping the motivations of teachers high. It has been emphasized in the report by UNESCO/ILO (2020) that the support provided to teachers should receive priority for the physical, psychological and social-emotional well-beings of the teachers including disadvantageous teachers considering that they will play a key role in identifying the learning gaps and arranging the educational strategies. Leaders should act fast and with foresight during times of crisis, however they should also be careful when evaluating the options, results and the side effects of the measures taken (Netolicky ,2020). Harris and Jones (2020) indicated that school management during the pandemic includes many uncertainties when they likened it to "walking on a tight rope without any safety net". The tight rope analogy can be used possible to define the situation in Turkey as 'dangerous with loads of adrenaline.'

It is important to realize that abiding by the procedures on the part of the teachers despite uncertainties in basic personal rights such as additional course payments and differences between

the procedures implemented at different schools is of significant importance. It is considered that the school principals should also acquire public management skills in addition to their educational leadership characteristics due to the need for the teachers to take on responsibility during times of crisis and the active roles they play in raising the awareness of the school environment. While taking part in the filiation teams have forced school principals to live with anxieties related with being in contact with the virus continuously while it has also made them feel as part of a larger whole as well as providing opportunities to associate their schools with the environment.

Educational inequalities have continued to increase during the pandemic period. It is frequently emphasized that the relations between having access to distance education and having access to technology resulted in making the socio-economic states of the families reflect more on education. However, it can be concluded that coupled with the socio-economic states; the social status, education level and cultural richness of certain connected variables also play an effective role in the process. According to Harris and Jones (2020), the pandemic revealed how educational inequality makes a deep impact on those with the least access. Differences between the students that are due mainly to the lack of digital amenities at home such as computers, internet and smart phones which are mostly related with the family economy played a distinctive role with regard to equal opportunities. In other words, the pandemic further accentuated the inequalities related with access to digital devices and the internet (Harris, 2020). When considered from this perspective, the fact that the social environment of disadvantageous students could not be changed and that it could not be improved through the school environment forced the students to remain locked up with their familial heritages. The limitations imposed on the access to technological devices due to the structure of distance education have been partially prevented through the implementation of TV broadcasting by the Ministry of Education in Turkey. Even though it is not expected that the TV broadcasts will be as effective as live courses, it was aimed to prevent the students from drifting away from education altogether.

The pandemic period provided the school principals with golden opportunities to ponder what is really important in education (Azorín, 2020). However, the predictions of school principals that the lessons learned during this period may be quickly forgotten are well-worth taking into consideration. In this regard, even though the expectations are not high, establishing local decision-making units and managing them efficiently, developing parent training programs and increasing the technological competence levels, focus on techno-pedagogic competencies on the part of institutions responsible from training and educating teachers and establishing effective communication and decision mechanisms among the school shareholders are among the advancements expected for the post-pandemic period.

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