



A Phenomenological Study of First-Year Primary School Teachers' Experiences during the Pandemic Era

Mesleğe Yeni Başlayan Sınıf Öğretmenlerinin Pandemi Sürecindeki Deneyimlerine Dönük Fenomenolojik Bir Çalışma

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Abstract: The first year of the profession is a difficult experience for everyone, but especially for teachers. The first year is the reflection of knowledge in practice for any job. During the years 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 outbreak has made more complicated this challenge for first-year teachers. The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of being a first-year primary school teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the phenomenological research design was employed. Using a purposeful sampling method, eight primary school teachers in their first year of teaching was chosen. The study group consisted of teachers from both urban and rural schools. Semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted via Zoom. The themes were created based on the content analysis method. The findings of the study revealed the challenges that the participants experienced during the pandemic, as well as how they tackled those challenges. In addition, the role of their colleagues, principals, and other stakeholders in dealing with the process was highlighted. They also described the impacts of their pre-service and in-service preparation on their ways of dealing with teaching in the pandemic. Last, but not least, they addressed the lack of affordances of the technologies that they used in distance education during the pandemic. The study concluded that the experiences of the first-year primary teachers provided strong insights on the level of preparedness of educators, as well as how to better prepare for future scenarios.

Key Words: Phenomenology, first-year teachers, primary school, COVID-19 pandemic

Özet: Mesleğin ilk yılı herkes için ama özellikle de öğretmenler için zor bir deneyimdir. İlk yıl, herhangi bir meslek için bilginin uygulamaya yansımalarıdır. 2020 ve 2021 yıllarında Covid-19 salgını mesleğe yeni başlayan sınıf öğretmenleri için bu zorluğu daha da karmaşık hale getirmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Covid-19 salgını sırasında sınıf öğretmeni olma olgusunu keşfetmektir. Bu nedenle, fenomenolojik araştırma deseni kullanılmıştır. Amaçlı örnekleme yöntemi kullanılarak, öğretmenliklerinin ilk yılında olan sekiz ilkökul öğretmeni seçilmiştir. Çalışma grubu hem merkezi hem de kırsal okullardan öğretmenlerden oluşmuştur. Her bir katılımcıyla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler Zoom aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Temalar içerik analizi yöntemine dayalı olarak oluşturulmuştur. Çalışmanın bulguları, katılımcıların pandemi sırasında yaşadıkları zorlukları ve bu zorluklarla nasıl başa çıktıklarını ortaya koydu. Buna ek olarak, meslektaşlarının, müdürlerinin ve diğer paydaşların süreçle başa çıkmadaki rolü vurgulanmıştır. Ayrıca, hizmet öncesi ve hizmet içi hazırlıklarının pandemiye öğretimde başa çıkma yolları üzerindeki etkinliğine de vurgu yapmışlardır. Son olarak, pandemi sırasında uzaktan eğitimde kullandıkları teknolojilerin olanaklarının yetersizliğine de değinilmiştir. Çalışma, mesleğe yeni başlayan öğretmenlerinin deneyimlerinin, eğitimcilerin hazırlık düzeyi ve gelecekteki senaryolara nasıl daha iyi hazırlanabilecekleri konusunda güçlü içgörüler sağladığı sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fenomenoloji, göreve yeni başlayan sınıf öğretmenleri, ilkökul, covid-19 pandemisi

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Introduction

The teaching profession emerges as a process that needs to be focused on from the first moment to the last to achieve educational goals. However, the first years of this profession require teachers to practice transferring the theoretical knowledge that they have acquired during their undergraduate education into a real classroom environment. The quality of a teacher's experience in the first years of the profession is of great importance in developing knowledge, competence, beliefs, and professional qualities and helping to build a positive attitude toward teaching as a career (Karlberg & Bezzina, 2022). On the other hand, adverse situations that arise in the first years of the profession, such as technical inadequacy or mobbing, can affect the entire career of teachers. Many studies have been conducted to reveal the problems experienced by teachers in the first years of the profession and the underlying causes of those problems (Merriweather & Morgan, 2013; Sowell, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Müller-Fohrbrodt, Cloetta, and Dann (1978) categorized the difficulties faced by teachers in their early years as having personal and impersonal reasons. While problems such as the unsuitability of individuals' personality traits for the teaching profession are categorized as personal reasons, inadequate undergraduate education, lack of materials in schools, loneliness in the institution where they work, the heavy workload that a teacher has to undertake, and poor authoritarian, bureaucratic, and hierarchical relations within the institutions where they work are classified as impersonal reasons (as cited in Veenman, 1984). It was stated that in order to prevent difficulties shaped by personal reasons, individuals should have characteristics such as patience, tolerance, strong communication skills, optimism, a high sense of responsibility, empathy, respect, compatibility, humor, and justice; they should also have a love of children, prosocial behaviors, and a behaviorist approach toward the teaching profession (Kasáčová, 2004, as cited in Tomšik & Gatial, 2018). The discovery of an individual with these characteristics depends on the education received before and during the undergraduate years, as well as the education received from the family. Individuals who do not have these characteristics realize it when they begin working as teachers.

As for the impersonal causes of difficulties, the institution where a teacher works is important because from the first days of that teacher's professional years, he or she is expected to have a comprehensive knowledge of the school's bureaucracy and the school's stakeholders. Veenman (1984) described the eight problems most frequently encountered by teachers in the first year of the profession as ensuring class discipline, motivating students, coping with individual differences, evaluating students' work, building relationships with parents, organizing classwork, coping with insufficient teaching materials, and dealing with the problems of students individually. In addition to these eight problems, the dimension of technological knowledge, which became more necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic, can be specified as an additional dimension (Schleicher, 2020) because many teachers needed technological knowledge to carry out distance education during the pandemic period.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers in the first year of the profession faced many new problems aside from the usual ones described above due to their unfamiliarity with the distance education process. Countries have implemented different education and training practices according to their own conditions and the course of the pandemic in their respective areas. Although countries wanted to continue face-to-face education during the pandemic, they had to switch to distance education from time to time depending on the course of the pandemic. In order to reduce the pandemic's impact on students, countries were recommended to have enriched educational materials for primary, middle, and high school levels in a virtual environment (OECD, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). There were many problems arising from the urgent need for distance education during the pandemic period, and the fact that teachers in the first year of the profession were beginning professional life during a pandemic was one of them. There are many difficulties experienced by teachers at the beginning of the profession, and these difficulties increased even more in the process of distance education.

Although studies have been conducted with teachers in the first year of the profession (Çetin, 2013; Öztürk, 2016; Sarı & Altun, 2015; Voss & Kunter, 2020; Karlberg, & Bezzina, 2022), there are limited studies directly determining the experiences of primary school teachers in the first year of the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to determine the first experiences of primary school teachers in the first year of the profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the experiences of primary school teachers in the first year of the profession regarding distance education during the pandemic period?
2. What are the opinions of primary school teachers in the first year of the profession regarding distance education during the pandemic period?

Method

A phenomenological design, as one of the qualitative research methods, was used for this study. Phenomenological studies consider the commonalities of individuals who have experiences related to a phenomenon that is to be explored with a single concept or idea (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim is to reveal what the phenomenon addresses, how it is experienced, what the essence of the phenomenon is in analysis, and how data are presented (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenon to be discovered in this study was determined as the experiences of primary school teachers in the first year of the profession during the pandemic. Phenomenology was determined as an appropriate methodology for this study as the researchers sought in-depth information about the experiences of primary school teachers in the first year of the profession during the pandemic.

Study Group

The study group consists of eight voluntarily participating primary school teachers working in public and private schools during the pandemic in the first year of their profession. The participants were determined using the criterion sampling method. In this context, to reveal the experiences of primary school teachers in the first year of the profession in terms of distance education applications during the pandemic, the criteria of having graduated from a primary school teaching undergraduate program and having less than one year of work experience were used. Data on the participants' genders, the regions of the schools they work in, and the types of schools are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

Teacher	Gender	School District	Type of school	Grade
T1	Female	Urban	Private	1st
T2	Female	Urban	Private	1st
T3	Female	Rural	Public	1st
T4	Female	Urban	Public	1st
T5	Male	Rural	Public	1st
T6	Male	Urban	Public	1st
T7	Female	Rural	Public	1st
T8	Female	Urban	Public	2nd

Data Collection

In phenomenological designs, interviews are the main data collection tools to reach the essence of the studied phenomenon and the perceptions underlying it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the semi-structured interview technique was used as it was aimed to investigate how primary school teachers in the first year of the profession experienced the pandemic period. A semi-structured interview protocol consisting of fifteen open-ended questions, developed by the researchers, was used to collect data. The interview questions were examined by two faculty members with relevant expertise and the agreement was finalized in line with their suggestions.

Data Analysis

The inductive method was used in the data analysis of this study. The inductive method is carried out by coding the data obtained to search for answers to research questions, grouping the obtained codes, and creating themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). NVivo qualitative analysis software was used in the analysis of the data. Interview records were transferred to a computer by the researchers and codes, categories, and themes were created based on the responses of the participants.

Validity and Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research shows whether the study process is consistent and whether there is a reasonable degree of stability between researchers and methods (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Different approaches are used to ensure reliability in qualitative research, one of which is the detailed description of the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the data collection process, participants, research process, and data analysis are described in detail. Another method for demonstrating reliability is performing and comparing data analysis processes with different researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In this study, the research data were analyzed and compared by three researchers. Validity in qualitative research refers to the provision of factors such as the significance of the results of the research, its transferability to other contexts, and generalization (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In order to ensure validity in this study, the findings were presented to the participants and their confirmation was obtained (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, detailed explanations of the research process and direct quotations from participants are included in the findings.

Findings

The themes that emerged as a result of the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews are shown in Figure 1.

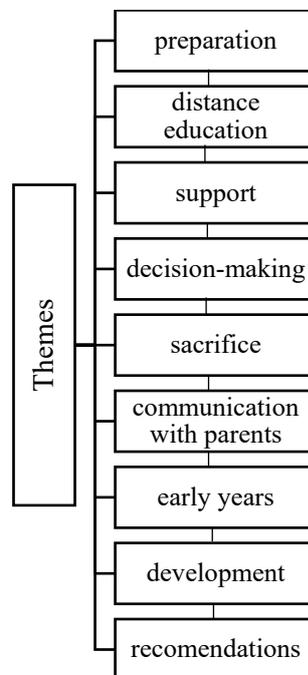


Figure 1. Themes: A result of the analysis

Preparation

In the interviews, the teachers were asked to what extent they felt ready for the steps being taken regarding distance education during the pandemic. They emphasized the pre-service and in-service training they had received. However, they also stated that they did not feel ready enough for distance education at the beginning, which caused anxiety. In this context, T2 stated that although he began to adapt to the distance education practices, he still felt inadequate.

T2: *“I still think I’m incompetent. I was hesitant before the pandemic. I got used to it as I did it, but I still don’t know the subject of integrating some applications into the lesson.”*

The participants offered different reasons for their anxiety. For example, T6 underlined the challenge of interacting with first graders who had just started school and stated that being unprepared for alternative interactions due to the pandemic caused anxiety both for him and his students. The same participant also described the difficulties that he experienced in adapting to this new process and the mental effects those difficulties had on him.

T6: *“Since we are primary school teachers, I need to be in direct contact with children; I need to show how to hold a pencil. We had a hard time because that was banned due to the pandemic.”*

T8 shared that as a teacher in the first year of the profession, he did not feel ready for teaching online and that no support was provided at that point. Similarly, T4 thought that the seminar week held before the academic year could have been structured around effective practices to be applied during the pandemic and that the lack of such preparation should be criticized.

T4: *“There is no training given to us on the use of technology in live lessons online. At the beginning of school, the seminar week was completely wasted. We could be taught technology-related applications such as Zoom, Google meetings. But we had to learn ourselves, nobody gave us training.”*

When participants explained that they were not ready for teaching in the pandemic, the main point that they emphasized was the inadequacy of their pre-service education. They shared that although they took courses specific to educational technologies, the contents of those courses were not useful enough during the pandemic. For example, T2 stated that the courses he took did not offer him any practical benefits.

T2: *“I can say that it was not beneficial at all. I have never received such training during my undergraduate years. I didn’t know what to do when faced with such a thing.”*

Similarly, another participant who emphasized the limited benefits of teacher education during the pandemic stated that the messages about the pandemic to educators needed to be understood correctly and that online education courses should be more intensive in undergraduate programs. T7 also underlined the necessity of focusing on the integration of specific courses, such as classroom management, in online learning environments.

T7: *“I mean, especially in the computer environment, for example, how to do classroom management, what can be given to students with rich content—we didn’t know about that in the computer environment, but we are trying to do something of our own right now.”*

Unlike other participants, T8 stated that the web-based applications that he learned about in undergraduate-level computer courses provided great benefit for teaching online during the pandemic. Accordingly, he stated that he felt lucky when he compared his undergraduate education with that of other colleagues and he admitted that this benefit may be unique to him.

Distance Education

Data analysis revealed the participants’ experiences of online teaching, which were intense during the pandemic. The most prominent finding in this regard was the limitations and negative aspects of distance education. In particular, teachers working in rural areas stated that most of their students could not attend lessons conducted remotely due to limited access to technologies such as computers and the Internet. T4 stated that only five of the 30 students in his class attended online courses and that it was not possible to expect the students to participate in distance education lessons because the necessary infrastructure was not provided.

T4: *“...considering that I have 30 students, five of them can attend classes. If there is no Internet there so that they can attend the lessons for free or if they are not given something so that they can connect to the lesson and if the teacher doesn’t have the infrastructure to prepare and deliver something to them technologically, nothing will make sense.”*

Participants tried to create individual solutions to these problems by devoting extra time and effort to deal with the problems caused by the students’ absence from online classes. For example, T5 stated that he prepared short lecture videos for students with attendance problems and shared the videos with their families via WhatsApp. As another solution, he arranged the online course schedule to have courses occur when the students’ parents were at home, making it possible for students to attend classes via their parents’ smartphones. T7 stated this situation as follows:

T7: *“I give the kids live online lessons between half past six and eight in the evening. I pay close attention to the presence of parents at home because children may not have their own phones since they are at the age of primary school; that is, I try to do the evening hours because parents have more phones [for children to use] and they are working in the daytime.”*

Another problem that the participants mentioned was the short duration of online classes. They stated that they planned their lessons according to those conditions to teach the course contents in a limited amount of time. They were forced to abandon student-centered approaches and teach completely content-oriented courses. In addition, some participants stated that they had to give priority to certain topics such as reading and writing, and they could not spare time for lessons such as physical education or art. These participants were uncomfortable with this situation but stated that they did not have an alternative option.

T6: *“When we got tired of the lesson in face-to-face training, we were playing games... Since our lesson has less time in distance education, the games we play should also be related to the lesson because we have no time to waste.”*

Teachers pointed out that classroom management in the online environment was another issue that challenged them in distance education. They shared that this difficulty was driven by the young age group of their students, and they followed different strategies to cope with it. For example, T1 and T2 stated that there were noise problems due to students talking simultaneously in the online environment and they had to turn off their microphones to prevent chaos. T2 noted that he did not find this strategy to be pedagogically correct, but he was forced to follow this path. T6 explained how the chaos experienced in online lessons negatively affected the lessons.

T6: *“When needing to talk, there’s chaos. If I mute everyone and I talk, I can’t understand whether what I was talking about really reached them this time. That’s why I don’t think it’s very healthy.”*

However, participants also mentioned the positive effects of online education on their professional development. They emphasized that the pandemic forced them to learn and apply technologies that can be used in distance education, increasing their competencies in using technologies, and they could pedagogically enrich their lessons in this way. For example, T1 stated that he developed professionally in his ability to make different aspects of the course, and especially evaluation, more effective with Web 2.0 tools.

T1: *“For example, we create a wide variety of applications in digital games. Children read books, then we evaluate them from Kahoot. They love it, too, and we have a Kahoot contest every week. We developed quite a lot of this kind of stuff, we didn’t use it so much when we were at school. We grew to use Web 2.0 tools.”*

Not only were teachers able to improve themselves; the participants shared that their students also improved and were able to exhibit many technology-related behaviors more comfortably than in the past. T1 stated that students could now easily log into the learning management system while they could not even sit properly in front of their computers at the beginning of the process.

T1: *“Previously, they couldn’t sit alone without their families. Even the families didn’t know how to turn up the volume. Now children can enter [online lessons] themselves by pressing the arrow alone, clicking on the teacher, typing the ID, and typing the password if it is simple. He can turn on his own sound and camera...”*

Thus, in addition to the difficulties, the participants also recognized some advantages of online learning over face-to-face education. For example, T4 shared that he could invite experts to participate in his classes thanks to distance education technologies.

T4: *“When we look at the advantages, I found the opportunity to host dentists, musicians, or people from many different fields in my class, who I could not bring to my classroom in face-to-face education.”*

T8 stated that he was able to apply many activities in the online environment that he could not perform previously due to the physical and technological opportunities that he lacked in his school, and he could easily show materials such as videos via computer.

T8: *“Well, at my school, maybe it was more effective than face-to-face education because there is no projector or smart board in my classroom; I was going to have a hard time showing something to these kids. But when [online education] is the case, I made it easy to watch a video and sent images to them easily.”*

Support

Participants reported receiving the most support from their colleagues during the pandemic. For example, T1 stated that decisions were made within groups throughout this process and support was provided by their colleagues in this union.

T1: *“We have group unity. Whatever decision we make, as a group, we handle the same topics until Friday; we do the same activities. That’s why it was very useful for me to have group union. That’s why I didn’t have any difficulties. When something happens, I ask my group.”*

Similarly, T7 shared that he consulted with his colleagues while making decisions in the distance education process and tried to carry out the process by taking colleagues as examples in certain situations.

T7: *“I was watching the content of the videos myself first and then let them watch it. So...I was taking [the videos] as an example, so I was planning that way.”*

T6 stated that he received support from colleagues, but in this case, the support came from his older brother, with whom he shared the same profession, and friends who were teaching in different regions and who had graduated from the same faculty as him, rather than other teachers working at his school.

Another group of stakeholders said to be supporting teachers in this process was parents. T2 reported that communication with parents was less frequent before the pandemic, and it increased with the pandemic.

T2: *“I also noticed that the fact that parents, teachers, and students were stakeholders of education did not actualize before the pandemic, but with distance education, parents are also involved. I think this connection has been established.”*

Finally, regarding support during the pandemic period, teachers took on the role of supporting others as well as receiving support. For example, T1 stated that his older colleagues did not have enough knowledge about technological tools, and so he shared his own knowledge with those teachers and supported them.

T1: *“During the pandemic period, such teachers can’t do anything; we always intervened, the young teachers. Believe me, there are still teachers who can’t write something in the Word. In this process, we understood the value of each other better.”*

Decision-Making

Another important finding is related to the views of the teachers about administrative decisions made at both national and local levels. The issue most emphasized by the participants was the inability of authorities to provide equal opportunity in distance education. T1, who works for a private educational institution, compared himself with his colleagues with whom he was in contact who were working in rural areas and recognized his more privileged position.

T1: *“They say they give internet access for EBA [national Education Information Network], but students also take lessons via the Zoom program. This is why many children suffer. All my friends say that students don’t log into the system, they are having difficulties. There are many places that don’t have Internet. While my students participate fully, the students in public schools can’t get connected. Inequality in education has increased a lot with this process.”*

Similarly, T8 believed that preparations for the pandemic period were carried out by taking the conditions of urban schools as a reference.

T8: *“There is no opportunity. No matter how much you are preparing, these preparations are made for a school in the center of Ankara; the children in the countryside can’t access them.”*

T2, who also works as a teacher in a private educational institution, stated that the decision of the school administration to use a different system than the online learning management systems used by public schools, taking advantage of a flexible decision-making mechanism, turned out to be an advantage for them.

T2: *“First of all, it’s very good that the application we use is Canvas; this is not used by public schools. Since our application was safe, we didn’t have any problems. This was the most important aspect.”*

The participants insistently underlined that administrative decisions should be made considering the possibilities of teachers and students during the pandemic period, and criticisms were made regarding the lack of such consideration. For example, T5 emphasized that students do not have sufficient opportunities, even though decisions were made by the central administration to conduct lessons over the internet. T7 stated that not only were students suffering from technical deficiencies, but teachers also experienced similar problems.

T7: *“In the beginning, the teachers were asked to have live lessons online; we had just arrived here, and we had no Internet. We had a lot of trouble getting the internet ourselves at first, and there was also no infrastructure in this place where I live.”*

The participants shared that while they were waiting for national or local support for the provision and use of the technologies they needed for distance education applications, they found themselves alone. T4 emphasized that the support he could not get in terms of technology negatively affected the effectiveness of his lessons. He stated that he wanted to design more effective lessons, but he felt alone and could not realize his goals due to a lack of technological support.

While evaluating the decisions made at the national level and their effects on lessons, the participants also emphasized the negativities caused by the lack of stability and the constant changes in the decisions being made. For example, T2 expressed that uncertainty and constantly changing decisions about the opening and closing of schools had a bad influence on them all. Participants also stated that the sudden decisions of authorities caught teachers unprepared, and they were confused about how to behave in the face of changing situations.

T2: *“When the decisions made change after two days, they’re all for nothing. For example, when it is said that the schools will be closed for three months, that decision should be upheld. It should not be changed after two days. What they do is damaging us.”*

Participants further stated that they thought that some of the responsibilities given to teachers by the authorities during the pandemic period, such as seminars, were unnecessary. They argued that these responsibilities were given by decision-makers simply to address the public perception that teachers were doing nothing during the pandemic. Supporting that viewpoint, T4 added that many teachers were infected with the virus as a result of these decisions. He compared the mandatory signing of attendance by teachers going to schools with probation.

T4: *“Since all citizens who do not teach in this society think that teachers are sleeping and sitting at home, we, teachers, had to go to school during the seminar weeks and sign in for the distance learning period. We were no different from prisoners on probation, and a significant percentage of teachers were infected with the virus during this period.”*

In addition to the decisions made by the central government, the participants also evaluated the decisions and practices of the administrations of the schools they worked at during the pandemic. T2, working for a private educational institution, found the preparedness of his school for pandemic conditions sufficient.

T2: *“There were good measures that only my school took. Everywhere was full of disinfectants and warning signs. As the precautions were taken by the school administration, it was up to us to just apply them and warn the children.”*

On the other hand, some participants working in public schools stated that they could not get enough support from the school administration. Participants said that their schools were insufficient, especially in terms of hygiene. T3 stated that steps taken by the school administration in terms of hygiene were generally carried out before the visits of school inspectors to avoid problems in inspections. He argued that steps taken in such situations were just formalities to “save the day.”

T3: *“The rules aren’t followed very much; we paid attention to masks and disinfectants when the inspector would come, and one day the healthcare professionals would come for inspection. Normally, I meet with the headmaster one day, but that day, he came and checked the class to see if the students were wearing masks. A lot of things are just for the sake of formality.”*

However, some of the participants working in public schools stressed that the school administration did try to do something even if it was not sufficient. Therefore, a main finding as a result of the analysis of the data is that the steps taken by school administrations varied widely from school to school.

Sacrifice

In the analysis of the data, participants were seen to be stating that they made some personal sacrifices to solve the problems they encountered regarding teaching during the pandemic period. They reported taking initiative in order to relatively eliminate the disadvantages caused by the pandemic. For example, T1 stated that the time determined for lesson hours was not sufficient for effective learning and he voluntarily conducted studies with his students outside of formal lesson hours.

T1: *“I have classes for four hours a day. I also give lessons of my own free will. My class consists of 20 students and study groups consist of four students.”*

Similarly, T5 stated that he utilized the time he went to the school for signing in with complementary activities such as reading with students and learning new sounds.

T5: *“The day we go to school for signatures starts at 9 and ends at 12. I go a little early, take the students in groups for half an hour, and study with them...”*

Explaining that nothing could replace face-to-face interactions with students, T4 shared that he went to their homes and visited them at the door to increase their motivation.

T4: *“When I missed the children, I went to their doorsteps, and they were very motivated. They asked if you would surprise them in every lesson; if it weren’t forbidden, I would give the lessons all together. Parents are very pleased with this aspect.”*

Some teachers, on the other hand, stated that on days of face-to-face education they distinguished between students who did not have access to the Internet and students who could attend synchronous online lessons to eliminate the learning differences between these two groups by conducting more than the basic lesson hours they were responsible for. For example, T7 treated a single class as two different classes by separating the students who could and could not attend synchronous online lessons remotely, making twice as much effort.

T7: *“I also separated those who attended the live online classes and those who did not attend them because when the schools opened, we started our live lessons before September 21. That is, we had progressed a little with those who attended the online classes. Then I started from scratch for those who could not attend the online classes. We progressed from where we left off with the students attending, I planned it that way.”*

In addition, participants shared that they used different applications for students who could not attend synchronous online lessons. T7 stated that he prepared videos to explain the subjects that students who could not attend online lectures did not understand, and he delivered these videos to the students via WhatsApp.

T7: *“For example, I said that some students cannot attend the live class online; I assign them homework via either WhatsApp or the EBA [national Education Information Network] system. I told them to always contact me if there was a subject they didn’t understand. Therefore, if there were any missing aspects in the activities I sent, I said I would definitely send it via WhatsApp and I told them to watch for them.”*

Teachers stated that in addition to the sacrifices described here, they also helped their schools in terms of meeting needs for masks and cleaning products. T5 reported that they were using part of their salaries to buy masks and disinfectant for their schools.

T5: *“We dedicate a quarter of our salary to the school. Masks are running out; not much help came from the Ministry of National Education. There are 250 students; the school is constantly running out of disinfectant.”*

Communication with Parents

Another finding that emerged as a result of the interviews with the participants involved the attitudes and behaviors of parents, as another group of stakeholders of the education and training process, during this period. Teachers working in private schools had a more positive perception of communication with parents in this process, and T2, a teacher at a private school, stated that parents were also satisfied with teacher-parent interactions during the pandemic.

T2: *“It was also a good opportunity for students and parents. The parents themselves say that they have never had such an opportunity before to participate in education. I think this aspect can be continued.”*

On the other hand, participants working in public schools complained that they could not obtain sufficient attention or support from parents during the pandemic period. For example, T3 was able to communicate and cooperate with very few parents during the pandemic and this had negative effects on students' learning processes.

T3: *“I wish my students' parents were more interested and I could get enough support from them. I have a few involved parents and I can see the difference.”*

It was also observed that some attitudes and behaviors of the parents made it difficult for the participants to work. Participants often shared their discomfort with the intervention of parents in online classes.

T4: *“One of the most challenging points was the participation of the parents, and it still is. They answer our questions to the children by whispering from behind the screen, causing children to be repetitive like parrots.”*

Finally, teachers stated that parents were not careful in taking personal safety measures against the pandemic.

T4: *“While I'm trying to protect our children in general—have him keep his mask on, have her wash her hands—I am dealing with this. The mother who comes without a mask. Unfortunately, the children we protect here go home hand-in-hand with these mothers.”*

Early Years

The findings obtained from this study revealed the results and effects of the participants' first year of teaching coinciding with the pandemic. Participants stated the advantages and disadvantages of this situation. The most important advantage of being in the first year of teaching in the pandemic period was the competence of the participants in technologies that could be used in distance education. Another point seen as an advantage in the pandemic period by the participants was higher energy and idealism and less burnout due to being in the first year of the profession. The statements of T2 revealed that he felt more energetic and dynamic than his colleagues.

T2: *“Our first-grade teachers are more experienced in terms of age; I prefer to be energetic and dynamic. I think this is my advantage.”*

On the other hand, T8 stated that this situation, which seemed to him to be an advantage, was not welcomed by the more experienced teachers at his school, who were critical of him.

T8: *“The biggest challenge I actually had was when we seemed too idealistic for other teachers. They said, ‘Now you are a new teacher, you are so enthusiastic, you'll fade after a year or two.’ If you have a desire, they are constantly questioning it. That enthusiasm will go, it won't remain. It's something that really affects us psychologically.”*

One of the other disadvantages of starting the profession during the pandemic was the inability to fully learn the functions of teaching due to not being present in a school environment. For example, T8 complained that they were expected to know what other teachers knew, although they could not really experience teaching due to the pandemic.

T8: *“There are advantages, because while most teachers...do not know how to open Word, Excel on the computer, we can find something by at least trying a little bit, at least we make an effort. While they ask questions about how we do live lessons through EBA [national Education Information Network], we are wondering and watching a video; we are doing something.”*

Development

As a result of the findings obtained from this research, the professional development of the participants in the pandemic period was revealed. The area in which the participants thought they developed the most during this time was the use of teaching technologies. Many participants had the opportunity to improve themselves in their usage of distance education technologies, about which they were biased before. For example, T1 stated that he developed himself in terms of distance education in the pandemic period and thus changed his prejudices against distance education.

T1: *“I was not that active on digital platforms. I made 80% or 90% improvement there. I can apply my outcome directly on the platform. I am more confident...”*

Participants also stated that they had the opportunity to spare more time for themselves with the pandemic, and they had opportunities to participate in webinars and online training for professional development.

T2: *“Then I take time for myself to relax, I attend webinars in the evenings. I follow the authors of children’s books. I learned about Web 2.0 tools. I design them myself and apply them with my students. When I attended the last webinar, I learned a game, revised that game, and used it in my lesson.”*

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They reported that they transferred what they learned from professional development opportunities to their classes. T8 stated that he tried to increase the effectiveness of his synchronous online lessons by participating in training about the distance education services provided by the Ministry of National Education. In addition, he stated that he attended specific purpose-oriented courses on topics such as speed reading and writing.

T8: *“The Ministry had training; they had training explaining EBA TV [national Education Information Network] and Zoom. I enrolled in it voluntarily at the beginning of the term. They were very detailed training sessions explaining what to do one by one and which portal did what, and so on. I got over those questions in my head after watching those videos because when you get to know the system, you know what you’re into and somehow you can overcome those problems...”*

Similarly, T4 said that he increased his competencies by attending courses that he could use in his lessons through the online portal of the ministry. Stating that he continued to enroll in a wide variety of courses throughout this period, he reported using the in-service training module effectively.

T4: *“Since September, I have benefited greatly from the MEBBİS [Ministry of National Education Information Systems] in-service training module. I took courses called Storytelling, STEM, New Approaches in Education, Design and Skill Workshops, and Emotional Intelligence Management.”*

In addition to professional development, it was observed that participants also focused on personal development by devoting time to themselves. During the pandemic period, some participants used the leisure time they obtained during lockdowns to acquire new personal hobbies. T4, for example, stated that in this period he could perform activities that he had long wanted to do but had been unable to pursue because of the intensity of his schedule.

T4: *“As for the quarantine period, I was always looking for a time to watch the movies and read the books I wanted at the very beginning. That’s why I did the readings I planned when I was given the time I was looking for at the beginning.”*

T2 also said that, in this period, he could do many activities that he could not do before due to the intensity of face-to-face education processes. He described this period as taking time for himself.

T2: *“I couldn't take time for myself at all before because I left the house at 8 in the morning and came home at 6 PM. When I came home, I was very tired; in this respect, the pandemic was positive for me. When I came home in the evening, time was spent dealing with the house, cooking. I couldn't do anything to improve myself.”*

Recommendations

Finally, the participants of this study made some suggestions in line with their experiences during the pandemic. Some participants stated that the importance of preschool education was revealed during the pandemic. Among students who had loss of learning opportunities or could not benefit from education and training services sufficiently during the pandemic period, those students who had received preschool education overcame their disadvantages more easily. T1 emphasized the advantages of having a group of students with preschool education.

T1: *“We are a lucky group; my students were able to read because they received preschool education.”*

Similarly, T5 explained how preschool education helped in primary school mathematics lessons.

T5: *“I have 25 students; most of them took preschool education. This provides an advantage as follows: they [already] learned the numbers that they will learn in the first two or three months in mathematics...”*

Another suggestion frequently emphasized by the participants was to partially continue distance education applications after the pandemic and switch to a hybrid education system.

T2: *“When we resume the normal process, it could be three days face-to-face and two days can continue as distance education.”*

T8 stated that children in this communication age can be prepared for modern life by increasing their technological competencies through continued use of distance education technologies.

T8: *“If children have the opportunity, it can be continued in this way; not all of them, not five days a week, but it could be good if there are live online lessons one day and four days at school. I think it is very nice because technology is a really useful thing for the children in the age of communication.”*

Conclusion and Discussion

Within the scope of this study, the experiences of primary school teachers in the first year of the profession and their perceptions about these experiences in the distance education process were examined in depth. As a result of data analysis, the themes of preparation, distance education, support, decision-making, sacrifice, communication with parents, early years, development, and recommendations emerged. The fact that the primary school teachers in the first year of the profession participating in this study were at the beginning of their teaching years, combined with distance education due to the pandemic, increases the originality of the phenomenon that is tried to be revealed in this phenomenological research.

Participants explained that they experienced great difficulties with the transition to distance education during the pandemic period. It was emphasized that both pre-service training and in-service training were insufficient to prepare them. They stated that although they had just graduated from primary education undergraduate programs, courses to gain the technological competencies they needed in this period were at a limited level. Yavuzer et al. (2006) similarly stated that undergraduate primary school teachers do not get enough efficiency from courses such as material design and technology. As

a solution to this problem, it was stated that instructors working in the primary education undergraduate programs should use technology well in their lessons and they should teach their students to use technology (Çelik, 2020). It is important to include activities and practices that are suitable for distance education as well as face-to-face education and that will enable teachers to adopt the teaching profession with high-quality and sufficient training during their undergraduate education process.

It was emphasized by the participants that neither national nor local decision-makers provided sufficient support to teachers or took enough responsibility at the point of decision-making. Therefore, it was observed that participants who had a feeling of inadequacy in the first year of teaching were negatively psychologically affected by the process and they had anxiety that these negativities would have effects in the future. Increasing inequality of opportunity in education between students living in rural and urban areas and those studying in public and private schools during the distance education period is seen as a negative part of the online process. In particular, the decisions made by decision-makers, both local and national, targeting students studying in urban areas without considering rural conditions can be shown as the biggest factor in increasing the inequality of opportunity. The frequent changes of the decisions made and training that was not suitable for the pandemic period and was given as a formality caused participants to be pessimistic in this process, with concerns about the inexperience of teachers in the first year of the profession. Alrefaie, Hassanien, and Al-Hayani (2020) stated that teachers should be trained in using technology and designing online learning in the distance education process. The experiences conveyed by the participants of the present research also revealed the necessity of this.

According to Burke and Dempsey (2020), elementary school teachers feel pressured and stressed during the remote education process. The participants discussed the drawbacks of beginning teaching during the pandemic, as well as the benefits of adaptability, motivation, and dynamism in the early years of teaching. Participants stated that they adapted to the technologies used in the distance education process faster than their more experienced colleagues and made significant progress in a short period of time to carry out this process more efficiently. Other studies in the literature (Alea, Fabrea, Roldan, & Farooqi, 2020) show that experienced teachers struggled with distance education practices during the pandemic and required assistance. This study backs up those findings with observations and experiences of teachers in their first year of teaching. On the other hand, participants in this study received the most support from their colleagues in dealing with the difficulties they faced during this period. The participants' belonging to Generation Z, also known as being "technologically indigenous," enabled them to support their more experienced colleagues, particularly in technology-related issues. According to Orlando and Attard (2016), new-generation teachers understand and communicate with their students better because of their "digital native" identities. This study also reveals the status of communication between these new-generation teachers and their colleagues and students.

The findings of this study showed that the participants had positive opinions about the effectiveness of this teaching method despite the difficulties they faced in distance education during the pandemic period, and they argued for the continuity of online and hybrid applications after the pandemic. Lack (2013), in his meta-analysis study of online learning, showed that online or hybrid learning environments are as effective as face-to-face learning environments in terms of learning outcomes. Likewise, Soffer and Nachmias (2018) found that online courses give students better results in terms of learning course content, communication, class participation, and satisfaction compared to face-to-face classes. In addition, although participants working in rural areas stated that their students could not attend online classes due to technical shortcomings, they said that they could overcome the disadvantages arising from the lack of technological materials in schools through online technologies.

These primary school teachers discussed the drawbacks of working in an online learning environment, particularly in rural areas. Due to difficulties in gaining access to technology, students in rural areas have limited participation in distance education. Previous research has identified access to the Internet and electronic devices as the most significant challenges for students in online environments (Karahan, Bozan, & Akçay, 2020; Sikirit, 2020). Inequality, according to Ugur-Erdogmus and Albayrak (2022), is one of the disadvantages of distance education; however, limited technology and Internet access created a barrier for some students to participate in distance education. According to the literature

(Giannini & Lewis, 2020; Chang & Satako, 2020), barriers to equal education are caused by difficulties with technology access.

In addition, there were difficulties in classroom management due to the insufficient level of readiness of primary school students for distance education and the limited course time. One of the fears of these primary school teachers who were new to the profession was reading and writing instruction. Primary school teachers in the first year of the profession, who had difficulties even in the face-to-face education process, felt this fear more frequently during the pandemic period. In this direction, they particularly spent more time on literacy education. Considering that first-grade students are of the playing age, difficulties in classroom management and the difficulty of teaching literacy come to the fore in the distance education process. Besides the disadvantages of distance education, however, advantages were also mentioned. Since there is no problem of space, field experts from other cities were invited to join lectures and the students had the opportunity to listen to relevant subjects being presented by these experts. In addition, the teachers participated in synchronous and asynchronous training whenever possible and they improved themselves, especially in using technology.

While emphasizing the importance of preschool education in this study, participants stated that students who attended preschool started primary school with certain skills, which provided an advantage for their teachers. Mathematics, which has a unique language and systematics that include abstract concepts, is very difficult to teach for first-grade students who are in the period of concrete operations. In particular, the fact that students who have received preschool education start school having already learned reading and numbers makes it easier for primary school teachers to introduce reading, which is one of the most difficult processes of the first grade, and to teach mathematics, which is an abstract topic. Bibi and Ali (2012) stated in their study that children who received preschool education acquired the prerequisite skills that made learning easier and faster, and they concluded that those children were more successful academically in primary school than children who did not receive preschool education.

One of the stakeholder groups that the participants expected the most support from was the parents of the students. Participants who worked in private schools made positive statements about the participation and support of parents, while participants working in public schools complained about the parents' indifference or inappropriate interventions. Similarly, in studies conducted with teachers working at different educational levels (e.g., Çakın & Külekçi Akyavuz, 2020; Fauzi & Khusuma, 2020), it was shared that teachers could not obtain support from parents though they expected it even more during the pandemic period. Considering the positive effect of parents' participation in education on many different variables, and especially the academic achievement of students (Fan & Chen, 2001; VanVoorhis, 2003), the importance of parents' cooperation with teachers under extraordinary conditions such as a pandemic becomes even more clear. Similarly, Rasmitadila et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of family, teacher, and school cooperation for effective teaching for students studying at home in the distance education process. The difference in parent behavior and approaches in private and public schools that emerged in this study is likely to further increase the gap in the inequality of opportunity in education. Therefore, these participants' experiences and strategies for involving parents in the education process are critical in terms of both short- and long-term results.

In a UNICEF (2020) report, it was stated that at least 463 million students worldwide were deprived of education during the pandemic, and these students were of low socioeconomic levels. Similar findings were revealed in the report published by the United Nations in the same year. According to that report, middle-low and low-income students could not access education during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this will lead to greater problems in the future (United Nations, 2020). The findings show that students studying in rural areas had serious problems in participating in distance education. In this regard, the participants stated that they made great efforts for those students to not fall behind their peers due to access to education. Therefore, this study is of importance in terms of revealing the value of teachers' roles in solving these problems, as also revealed in international reports. The participants took responsibility by making sacrifices so that students studying in rural areas would not fall behind their peers. In particular, they aligned the curriculum with the education given on television.

The fact that the participants of this study were primary school teachers in the first year of the teaching profession is valuable in terms of the importance and originality of the experiences revealed.

Participants talked about the difficulties they faced in the lessons they conducted both online and in the classroom. During the pandemic, the difficulties of paying attention to physical distance rules in the classroom environment, communicating with students, and ensuring classroom management in the online environment came to the fore. Primary school children have different cognitive levels and needs than those in other grade levels (Ugur-Erdogmus & Albayrak, 2022). However, primary school teachers have difficulties in understanding the personal problems of their students, especially when they are newly employed, and the most important reason for this is not knowing the students well and not knowing the family problems underlying the behaviors of students (Yıldırım, Fidan, & Ergün, 2017). This started to become even more problematic for primary school teachers in the first year of the profession in the distance education process. The biggest reason for this was that many primary school teachers met face-to-face with their students during the distance education process for very short times.

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