

Challenges of Distance/Online and Face-to-Face Education in the New Normal: Experiences of Reggio Emilia-Inspired Early Childhood Educators in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to examine the perceptions and experiences of Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood educators in Turkey regarding the difficulties they experienced in the New Normal. The study utilized the method of phenomenography. Data collection included an online questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions and demographic information questions. Data analysis included both the content analysis and the thematic analysis. The study involved 226 Reggio Emilia-inspired educators from different schools in Turkey. The findings showed that many of the participants were not aware of different ways to do distance education and adhered to online education only. Most of those educators, who adhered to online education, complained about difficulties and negative experiences related to online education and they thought that online/distance education is suitable for children aged 6 and up but not for younger ones. Only a few of them agreed that online education was effective in supporting children's development and learning. On the other hand, all of them agreed that face-to-face education was effective during the pandemic. The findings of the current research also showed that some educators received both parents' support and others' support (e.g., own relatives, managers, colleagues) but some of them received no support at all during the pandemic.

Keywords: early childhood education, preschool, COVID-19, Reggio Emilia, phenomenography

INTRODUCTION

Reggio Emilia approach, born in Italy, is one of the contemporary alternative early childhood education models in the world, and the number of schools inspired by this approach in Turkey is increasing rapidly. Reggio Emilia education is about conducting exploration and investigation in the environment, doing a project work at least in pairs, being a community of learning while learning, using various languages like visual arts to be able to communicate effectively. All of those activities need to be done hands-on and collectively but it might be difficult to accomplish them virtually or face-to-face in the New Normal. Accordingly, Reggio Emilia-inspired teachers in Turkey might be having difficulties in conducting online/distance education or face-to-face education while following the hygiene/social distance rules during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study aimed to examine the perceptions and experiences of Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood educators in Turkey regarding the difficulties they experienced in the New Normal.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

At beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, the government locked all of the early childhood education centers down in Turkey and declared for distance education until June 2020. As seen in Distance Learning Model adapted from Coldeway's (1986) Quadrants, there are four distinct ways to conduct distance education, i.e. students and the teacher are in the same place at the same time, students and the teacher are in the same place at different times, students and the teacher are in different places at the same time, and students and the teacher are in different places at different times (**Figure 1**). However, the schools were not ready for such an emergency in Turkey regarding conducting distance education, neither were Reggio Emilia-inspired preschools in Turkey.

DIFFERENT TIME	Different Time & Same Place	Different Time & Different Place
SAME TIME	Same Time & Same Place	Same Time & Different Place
	SAME PLACE	DIFFERENT PLACE

Figure 1. Distance Learning Model adapted from Coldeway's (1986) Quadrants

Not only Reggio Emilia-inspired educators in Turkey but also many other preschool educators around the world have experienced various problems in the New Normal and sought solutions as cited by researchers (e.g., Allvin, 2020; Cockcroft, 2020; Ferdig et al., 2020; Fraga, 2020; Mutton, 2020; OMEP, 2020; Pawilen, 2020; Varea & González-Calvo, 2020; Wasmuth, 2020). For example, the countries in the European Union were not ready for such an emergency and declared, "Seventy-one (71.0%) of union respondents reported that students were being taught via online platforms. However, some member organizations indicated that when schools closed there had been no systems in place for online learning and little existing content for distance learning, making the transition to this mode of education a challenge." (EI Survey Report, 2020, p. 17). Scottish Government Learning Directorate (2020) also stressed the importance of physical distancing in early learning and childcare settings and kept children away from schools at first, but then was afraid about staying behind in the education of young children. It can be said that many countries did not know how to conduct comprehensive distance education and face-to-face education following the hygiene/social distancing rules during the COVID-19 pandemic.

McClain Terrell (2020), the president of NAEYC, states that two things became critical during the pandemic: The practices of self-care and self-reflection. That means nobody knew what to do at that time and they came up with their own solutions on both distance and face-to-face education. Similarly, educators and parents, all in Turkey, became an initiator and made decisions on the education of young children by themselves because nobody knew anything at that time. As if there was a consensus, many educators all around the world closed the schools and started doing distance/online education. Moreover, not only educators but also some other professionals, who were responsible for the education of young children, started doing online education for young children. For example, the staff in Denver Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library started doing programs online for young children, like doing live-music and reading books online (Cockcroft, 2020).

About such consensus, Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020) blame the media and state, "The media play an essential role in providing information at the initial stages of a disease outbreak." (p. 7). They state that the media controlled what people believe and how they behave. As stated by Louis-Jean and Cenat (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic altered education across the World and the severity of the virus forced people to confine to homes to slow down the spread of the coronavirus, to keep social distancing and practicing coughing/sneezing etiquette, and to find ways to continue on education. Louis-Jean and Cenat (2020) state, "This could intrinsically require educators to work with educational technology companies to figure out and develop the best instructional designs to make the best out of e-learning." (p. 3). Similarly, Tria (2020), a researcher in Philippines, state, "Future studies are recommended such as planning and implementation strategy, assessing online learning systems to schools, a survey on online platforms, project proposals and capstone projects, program creation, community assessment, revision of curricula, development of instructional materials and many more." (p. 3). It is clear that actions need to be taken on education practices.

Although there was a general tendency to do online/distance education all around the world, there were local and cultural differences among practices of educators and the difficulties they had. Pramling-Samuelsson, Wagner, and Eriksen (2020) conducted research in three different countries, namely Sweden, Norway, and the United States, and stated, "The conversations reveal culturally situated similarities of early childhood educational practices but also differences across contexts. Teachers report on the challenges of their experiences but also benefits for their practice and how they engage with children and their families." (p. 129). Even when schools were started to open gradually across the world, nothing was the same regarding the face-to-face education in the New Normal. Accordingly, it became essential for us to conduct the current research for Turkey and explore early childhood educational practices and difficulties that Reggio Emilia-inspired educators experienced in Turkey.

AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The current study aimed to explore and examine early childhood educational practices and difficulties that Reggio Emilia-inspired educators had in Turkey during the pandemic. Based on the findings, the current study also aimed to develop suggestions for the training of educators in the New Normal. Thus educators working in Reggio Emilia inspired schools can be offered a training package, and they can reconstruct their understanding and practices about early childhood education in the New Normal. In line with this purpose, the following goal was determined:

Understanding the challenges of distance/online and face-to-face education in the New Normal by examining perceptions and experiences of Reggio Emilia-inspired early childhood educators in Turkey from March through September 2020.

METHODOLOGY

This section presents participants, data collection, and data analysis methods of the current research.

Since it was needed to obtain rich data and focused-information on what Reggio Emilia-inspired educators experienced during the pandemic, the current study opted to utilize one of the qualitative research methods, namely phenomenography. As stated by

Billsberry, Ambrosini, Garrido-Lopez, and Stiles (2019), phenomenography is about understanding how participants make sense of particular phenomena. Since the research method of phenomenography aimed to find out what is in people's minds, it helped the researcher in the current study understand Reggio Emilia-inspired educators' view of difficulties experienced in the distance and face-to-face education during the pandemic. The current research is an empiric study that aimed to focus on experiences and perceptions of educators about the phenomenon. Accordingly, phenomenography was a perfect method for the current study focusing on experiences and perceptions of educators and their ways of defining the selected phenomena (Marton 1994; Webb, 1997).

DATA COLLECTION

An online questionnaire was used to collect data under the method of phenomenography. Since the current research aimed to identify the problems Reggio Emilia-inspired educators experience in distance/online and face-to-face education during the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions like "What is your experience of particular phenomena?" and demographic information questions, which provided an important information about the profile of Reggio Emilia-inspired educators participated in the study. Data collection lasted for two weeks.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed through the content and thematic analyses, which are prevalent tools of qualitative research studies. As consistent with the thematic analysis, the open-ended survey recordings were listed first and then the lists were analyzed comparatively and cumulatively. The meanings driven from the data were labeled and then categorized, and finally, each category was supported with excerpts from the data as evidence. To be able to accomplish the reliability of the analysis, discrepancies in the data were also revealed. Moreover, as consistent with the content analysis, the current study utilized basic quantitative calculations to understand some of the data. Accordingly, while the content analysis provided a descriptive approach to the current study in both coding of the data and its interpretation of simple quantitative calculations of the codes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Downe-Wamboldt, 1992), the thematic analysis provided to the current study a purely qualitative and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

PARTICIPANTS

It was aimed to examine what difficulties educators experienced in providing distance or face-to-face education following Reggio Emilia approach in the New Normal. Accordingly, all Reggio Emilia-inspired educators in Turkey were invited to participate in this research and fill out the questionnaire voluntarily. However, to participate in this study, the condition of working currently or at least having been worked during the COVID-19 pandemic was sought. Informed voluntary consent was obtained. Confidentiality of all participants in this research was accomplished through concealing the real names, and no identifying information, such as the name of institutions they were working for, was included.

The number of educators in Reggio Emilia-inspired schools in Turkey is not so large and this is the very first research which was conducted on such topic, so the entire universe was invited to participate to be able find a meaningful variation. Billsberry, Ambrosini, Garrido-Lopez, and Stiles (2019) state, "Most phenomenographic studies employ simple and straightforward data-gathering and analysis and do not require large data sets." (p. 630) and continue that about 30 participants is "relatively low sample size and apparent simplicity makes the approach appealing, but may lead to skepticism, particularly in relation to how the researcher has determined the structure of conceptions" (p. 630). In the current study, 226 Reggio Emilia-inspired educators participated from 33 cities in Turkey as well as one from Baku, Azerbaijan, and one from Brescia, Italy by completing the questionnaire (see [Figure 2](#)).

All of the data that came from volunteer participants in Turkey were included in the study to obtain as much as information from a variety of voices except the ones that came from other countries because the target of the current study was Turkey. However, to be more accurate, the researcher wanted to show that those volunteer participants from other countries were participated in the study. In the future, similar research might be done in Turkey including countries other than Turkey to be able to get a more global understanding of the difficulties that Reggio Emilia-inspired educators had during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The participants, who were all Reggio Emilia-inspired educators, held various positions at schools. They were mostly managers (38), preschool teachers (168) and pedagogistas (8). The rest of the participants was elementary school teachers, physical education teachers, math teachers, atelieristas, program developers, and academics as a parent or an architect. The age group/s of children they worked with are as follows: 9,7% of the participants worked with children aged between 0-2; 32% of the participants worked with children aged three years; 44,7% of the participants worked with children aged four years; 60,6% of the participants worked with children aged five years; 38,5% of the participants worked with children aged six years; the rest of the participants worked with older children. It is important to note that those educators worked with one or more age groups at the same time, that's why some of the percentages overlap.

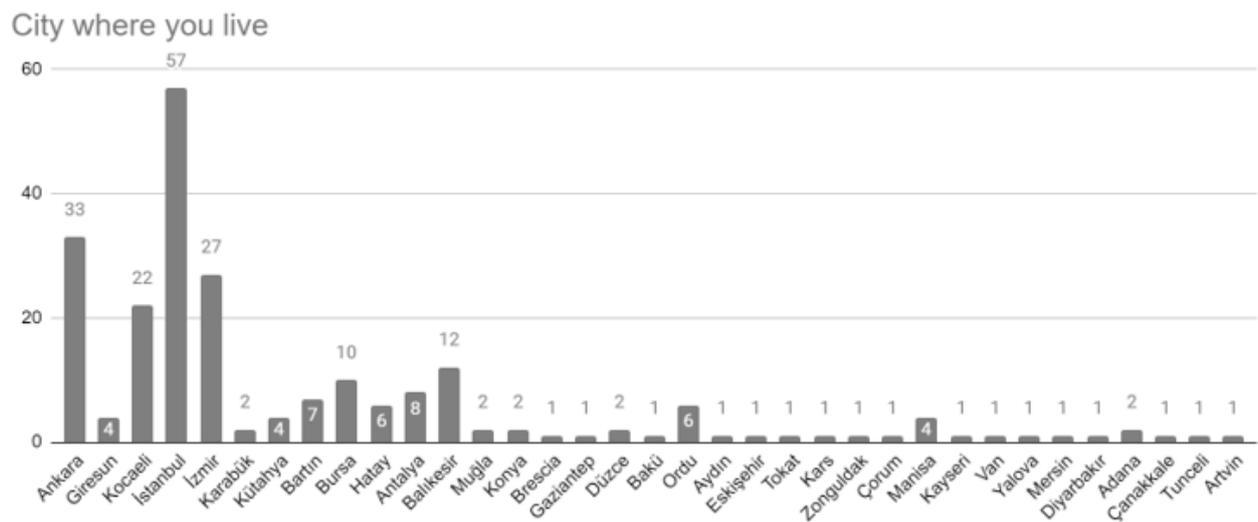


Figure 2. Cities where the participants live

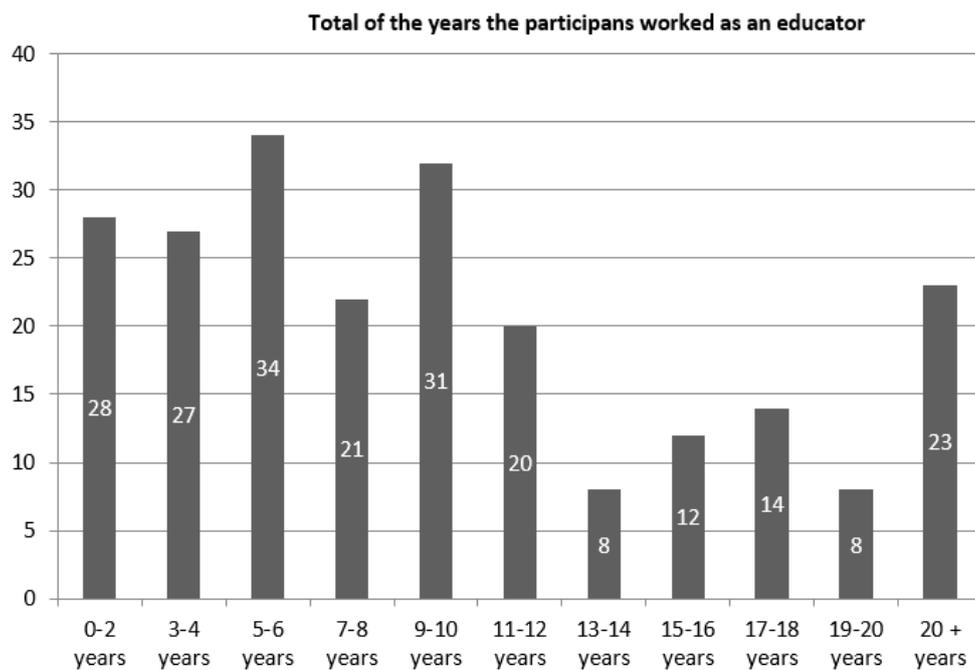


Figure 3. The total of the years 226 participants worked as an educator

Moreover, the total of the years that they worked as an educator is presented in **Figure 3**, and the total of the years that they worked as a Reggio Emilia-inspired educator is presented in **Figure 4**.

As seen in **Figure 3**, the total of the years the participants worked as an educator varies a lot between less than a year to more than 20 years. Accordingly, the participants of this research are good representatives in terms of having voices of educators with varying years of experience.

On the other hand, as seen in **Figure 4**, the total of the years the participants worked as a Reggio Emilia-inspired educator is comparatively short. This is something expected because Reggio Emilia approach is a new coming pedagogy to the education system in Turkey. More than half of the participants (122) had experiences with Reggio Emilia for less than one year.

Lather (1986) states that including a variety of voices is seen as strength of research studies. This is a general principle of qualitative methodologies to be democratic and accurate and to control bias by ensuring the representativeness of a variety of participants (Howe, 2004). Accordingly, it can be said that the participants in the current study were good representatives regarding the cities that they were from, the role they held at the school, the age groups that they worked with, and the varying years of experience as an educator and as a Reggio Emilia-inspired educator. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (2003) state that all voices in the inquiry effort should have a chance to be represented in the research and to have their stories on the topic treated fairly and with balance. Accordingly, the current research aimed to include as much as voices in the research and treated the data that came from the participants fairly and with balance by including their stories or representing their stories by the themes and the codes in the research without making generalization. Furthermore, the participants provide important information about the profile of Reggio Emilia-inspired educators in Turkey. For example, it shows how prevalent Reggio Emilia is throughout Turkey.

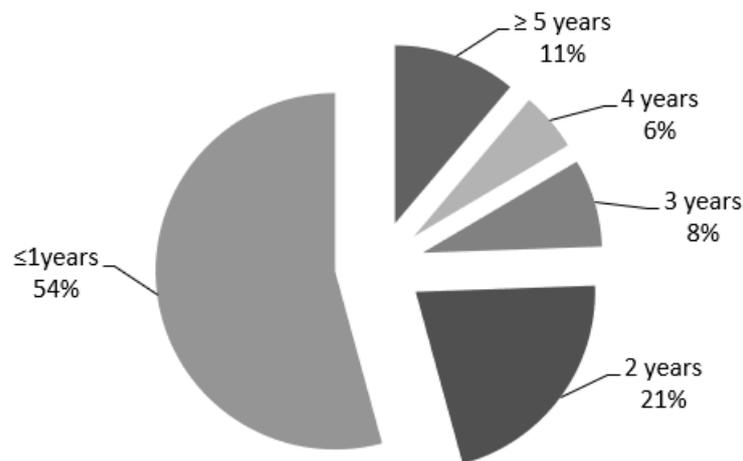


Figure 4. The duration of their experiences as a Reggio Emilia-inspired educator



Figure 5. Have you done online or distance education with children in your institution during the pandemic?



Figure 6. Have you had face-to-face education with children in your institution during the COVID-19 pandemic?

FINDINGS

The answers of the participants to the question “Have you done online or distance education with children in your institution during the COVID-19 process?” are presented in **Figure 5**.

The answers of the participants to the question “Have you had face-to-face education with children in your institution during the COVID-19 pandemic?” are presented in **Figure 6**.

Figure 5 shows that 78% of the participants did online or distance education with children at their institutions during the pandemic. **Figure 6** shows that 30% of the participants appeared to be doing face-to-face education. It is also essential to note that 7.5% of the participants did both online/distance and face-to-face education at the same time. Moreover, it is important to

Table 1. What is your experience of face-to-face education during the pandemic?

The way	How? (Methods)	Example excerpts from answers
Face-to-face	*Outside time	"Yes. We took precautions and carried out open-air field visits with protective equipment."
	*Protection equipment	"We did not put pressure on children regarding distance because we did outdoor trainings and we constantly washed our hands and applied disinfectants. We kept distance between the tables. We customized the materials."
	*Personalized materials	
	*Social distance	
	*Following hygiene rules	"I have been doing face-to-face education since June. We have observed a high level of anxiety in children. We took a break during the seminar period. Then we started again. Our new open field observations have begun. Since we were not using the materials and common areas as before, I listed the materials they enjoy working with and an action was taken to provide them."
	*Providing children with their favorite materials	
	*Keeping fewer materials in classrooms	"I had a one-to-one zoom conversation with each child for half an hour a day. I get involved in their games. We planned and designed games with materials at that time according to what came from them."
	*Doing both face-to-face and online education	"Yes, we have just started. First of all, we talked about this situation with the children. We talked to them, they listened to us, they talked to us, we listened to them. And together we came to the conclusion that we can take measures. We take temperature. Our teachers are absolutely masked in all kinds of work. Hands are washed frequently; we learned not to put our hands on our faces as much as possible by playing. We use disinfectants when we cannot wash. When we enter the institution, everyone, including children, change their clothes and we learned the social distance rule with the game of "Arm's Length."
	*Fewer children in classrooms	"Yes, we did. We worked with distances of the animals. Like the wingspan of birds, the way elephants walk their ears. We made distant clothing designs. We conducted research on what a pandemic is and pandemics in the world history, and we have done many projects like this. We transformed the classroom and school with the children according to the New Normal. Like they designed poster images, personalized the materials."
		"I showed the students visual posters of rules. We listened to songs and examined the books. We chatted about the rules at the circle time."
	"We made an exploration of the nature with personal collection pouches in the garden of our school and made art works with the materials found in the garden."	
	"I served for 1 month. I planned activities according to the interests of the children by blending them with the Project Approach. We worked on the theme of space/sky for 1 month. In general, we were able to adjust the physical distance by making adaptations which are suitable for the event format. For example, we shouldn't bump into the life unit of our friend next to us, because the life unit in the astronaut dress is large. However, I had a hard time moving to the rhythm I wanted in large group works."	
	"We do our work in the garden by preparing activity centers with the children. Activity centers include the materials they want, like clay works, designs with natural products."	

note that among the ones who did online/distance education only 75 out of 176 participants, which is very low (33% of total participants), tried to adapt their online/distance education according to the Reggio Emilia principles. As understood from the data, some of the educators could not continue education during the pandemic or some of them could not provide education according to the principles they believed in, namely Reggio Emilia principles. Education was hindered by the pandemic.

The answers of the participants to the question "Did you do face-to-face education with children in your institution during the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, please explain in detail how you did face-to-face education following Reggio Emilia approach and how you followed the hygiene/social distance rules." are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1 presents many findings about the experiences of educators during the pandemic. The data show that they tried to accomplish one or two of the followings in the New Normal: "More outside time," "Protection equipment," "Personalized materials," "Social distance," "Following hygiene rules," "Providing children their favorite materials," "Keeping fewer materials in the classroom," "Doing both face-to-face and online education at the same time," and "Keeping fewer children in classrooms." The data also show that educators used at least one or two methods, which are stated in **Table 1**, during face-to-face education. However, all of those methods should be a must for every school. Moreover, there were some other discrepancies in the data. For example, one participant stated, "We could not adapt to constant hand washing, working with a face mask and keeping social distance." However, all of the schools should apply those rules as a must because of the risk of pandemic.

The answers of the participants to the question "If you did online/distance education, what kind of difficulties did you encounter while doing online/distance Reggio Emilia-inspired education?" are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2 presents the difficulties encountered by the educators, namely, having no mental involvement of children online because of shorter attention span during early years, less interaction online, a risk of direct instruction (i.e., lecturing) online, bored kids online, technological problems like bad Internet connection, no hands-on education online, limited variety of activities online, and even no physically participation online. However, none of them is related to different ways of distance education other than online education. All of the difficulties stated by the educators are about online education. Educators should learn different ways of distance education in early childhood education to overcome the difficulties of online education as well as effective usage of online tools.

Table 2. What kind of difficulties did you encounter while doing online/distance Reggio Emilia-inspired education?

Difficulties in online/distance education	Example excerpts from answers
*Short attention span (No mental involvement online)	"As the age group gets smaller, they cannot focus."
*Less interaction online	"Yes, I did. I think it's ridiculous."
*Risk of direct instruction online	"Sitting in front of the screen and trying to teach (learn) with the classical method is boring as well as challenging for children."
*Bored kids online	"Sound interruptions."
*Technological problems	"Not being able to do projects together, not experimenting together."
*No hands-on education online	"Students without Internet and computers had a hard time."
*Limited variety of activities online	"Not being eye to eye with the child, and mostly mothers trying to do the activity prevented me from achieving the goal that I wanted."
*No physically involvement online	"We were having trouble in producing a content." "Connection problems, lack of full participation, and sometimes families' lack of coordination negatively affected the process."

Table 3. "What kind of difficulties did you experience while doing face-to-face Reggio Emilia-inspired education?"

Difficulties in face-to-face education	Example excerpts from answers
*Fewer materials	"They couldn't bring a material from home. We could not get guests. We couldn't take a field trip. "
*No sharing	"We had difficulties because we had little contact with children and we were careful about not using common materials for hygiene reasons."
*No field-visiting	"The crowded classes of mine and the intensity of academic education I gave. Not being able to create a time and an environment that will direct and structure the project work and not enabling children to gain experience."
*Crowded classrooms	"We had a hard time in getting the kids seated in front of the screen."
*Difficulty in keeping children in front of the screen	"We had a shortage of materials, lack of physical space, not being able to go to nature enough. We did not do (online) education during the time of COVID-19."
*Less physical space	"I had trouble in catching the curiosity of the child. I had a hard time in planning the next process of curiosity and preparing provocation."
*No outside time opportunities	"We had the difficulties in being face to face and online at the same time."
*Difficulty in finding tread of interest	"We are still in the orientation process with children. They have concerns as if we haven't passed the last 1.5 years together. "
*Difficulty in doing documentation	"Not knowing Reggio exactly."
*Difficulty in doing provocation	"Only with children with specific learning difficulties."
*Difficulty in having both online and face-to-face education at the same time	"I didn't have much difficulty except for the distance."
*Back to school/adaptation problems	"Project steps."
*Lack of knowledge in Reggio Emilia approach	"When we started doing face-to-face education again, we experienced an adaptation problem in all age groups. The children had technological crises frequently during the day and they asked us for tablets and phones. After 3 months, they returned as more adult addicted children."
*Children with special rights	
*Social distance	
*Technology addiction	
*Difficulty in doing project-based education	

The answers of the participants to the question "What kind of difficulties did you experience while doing face-to-face Reggio Emilia-inspired education?" are presented in **Table 3**.

Although most of the participants complained about having difficulties in online/distance education, comparatively fewer participants complained about difficulties they experienced during face-to-face education. Although the researcher predicted to see more problems in project development as it usually takes place in pairs or groups, the problems of the participants ranged from having insufficient materials and space inside and outside the school to adaption problems after the long break. More specifically, it is found that educators had difficulties in conducting face-to-face education because of having fewer materials in classrooms as a result of removing materials from the school for hygiene reasons, crowded classrooms, less physical space in classrooms, no sharing allowed among children, no outside time or field-visit opportunities any more, and back to school problems after lock-down (i.e., being technology addicted during the lock-down and asking for tablets or phones at school all the time, or hardly adapting to school). It is also found that they had difficulties in keeping children in front of the screen in the classroom, finding tread of interest to start projects, doing documentation and provocation as musts of Reggio Emilia approach, working children with special rights (i.e., children with special needs), doing project-based education, keeping social distance in the school, and having both online and face-to-face education at the same time. Moreover, some of the participants stated that they had lack of knowledge on Reggio Emilia approach itself and that's why they were having difficulty in doing face-to-face education effectively.

The answers of the participants to the question "Do you think that education was effective for children during the pandemic? What is your experience of effective face-to-face and online/distance education during the pandemic?" are presented in **Table 4**.

Table 4. Do you think that education was effective during the pandemic? What is your experience of effective face-to-face and online/distance education during the pandemic?

The way	Example excerpts from answers
Effective:	
*Supported individual work	"I think, yes, because children are washing their hands properly every time they get into line and go to the playground."
*Supported self-regulation	"I think that it is effective because we are moving towards online education system gradually and I find online education efficient in terms of creating processes that are more adaptable and sustainable."
*Supported child image, who is creative thinker	"Any kind of education contributes learning."
*Supported active learning	"I think that online education is not effective for young children at all."
*Reggio changed our understanding of ECE	"No. We could not live the team spirit side by side, as unity."
*Supported professional development	"We did not do it face to face, and online education was not effective because we could not reach everyone and we could not apply the Reggio education model."
*Supported asking questions	"I do not think that online education provides teachers an opportunity to observe and listen to children pedagogically. Therefore, I do not think that online education is effective. "
*Supported learning with nature, technology and home materials	"It was not very effective due to the children being young, being active, Internet freezing constantly, and sound quality being poor."
*Supported child-centered education	"I think that teachers should constantly update themselves. The world is changing every moment and the information should be renewed and kept up with the time."
*Supported new types of education	"Yes, but it worries me that teachers are at risk"
*Supported learning in any way	"We have observed high levels of anxiety in children."
Not effective:	
*No community of learning online	
*Not much interaction online	
*Not much pedagogical listening/documentation online	
*Bad technology	
*No being inspired by Reggio sufficiently	
*Being afraid of getting infected	

Table 5. Did the parents support you during this process? Did others support you during this process? How and who?

	How?	Example excerpts from answers
Parent supports	*No support	"No."
	*Materials	"They provided sterile material."
	*Educational support	"They shared the activities with us as a feedback and they cared about it."
	*Technical support	"We didn't get much support from parents in this process. Their expectations were a more classic/traditional education."
	*Hygiene	"They provided technical support." "They supported us. Especially with the hygiene rules. Brought the items after disinfecting them first. Took precautions even when the children got a runny nose. Helped us a lot."
Other supports	*No support	"School staff tried to support."
	*Other educators in the school	"The Education Reform Initiative and the teacher network have provided studies and reports."
	*Educational networks	"I got support from subject matter experts, the school administration, my own family and children's families."
	*Experts	"Grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts. They were all great. "
	*Own family	"We received a lot of training online"
	*Child's other relatives	
*Online educational supports		

The answers of the participants to the question on effectiveness of education during the pandemic did not vary much (**Table 4**). Most agreed that face-to-face education during the pandemic was effective in supporting children's development and learning but online education was not effective in supporting children's development and learning. They also added another difficulty they experienced during online/distance education: Not much pedagogical listening/documentation online. Only a few agreed that online/distance education was effective in some ways, such as increasing children's self-regulation skills. Moreover, although most of the educators thought face-to-face education to be effective during the pandemic, they were worried about their health during the pandemic (i.e., getting infected by coronavirus).

The answers of the participants to the question "Did the parents support you during this process? Did others support you during this process? How and who? Please explain." are presented in **Table 5**.

It is found that some of the participants faced difficulties all by themselves while some of them were lucky in terms of getting support in various ways, such as getting education about the new education system.

The answers of the participants to the question "For what age groups do you think online/distance education is suitable?" are presented in **Figure 7**.

Most of the participants think that online/distance education is suitable for children aged 6 and up.

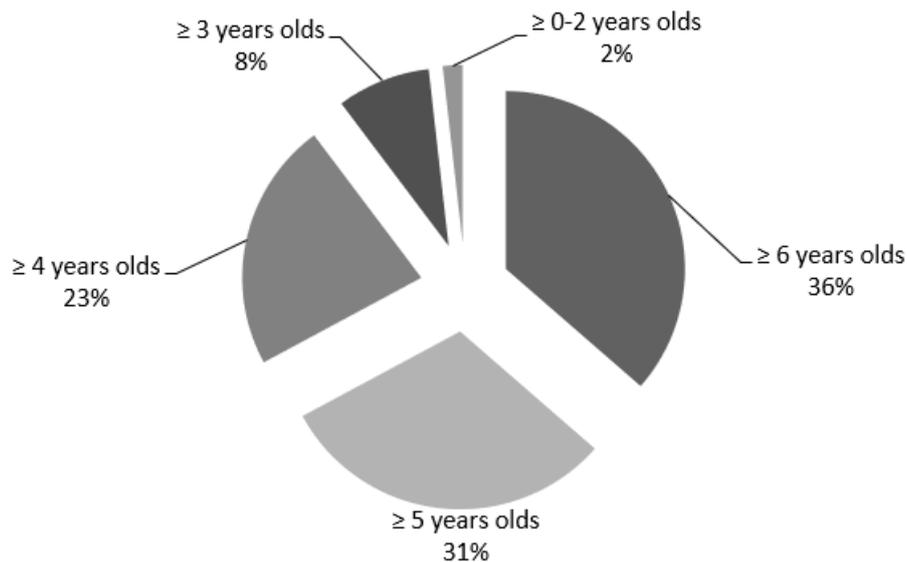


Figure 7. For what age groups do you think online/distance education is suitable?

DISCUSSION

The current research involved 226 Reggio Emilia-inspired educators from 33 cities of Turkey. The participants, who were all Reggio Emilia-inspired, had various roles as an educator, namely school managers, preschool teachers, pedagogistas, elementary school teachers, physical education teachers, math teachers, academics as an architect or a parent, atelieristas, and program developers. Most of them focused on preschool ages while a few of them focused on the early ages of elementary school years. In short, all focused on early childhood years. The participants ranged between less experienced educators to 33 years of experienced educators. On the other hand, the total of the years the participants worked as a Reggio Emilia-inspired educator was comparatively very short. Accordingly, the participants were good representatives of the Reggio Emilia-inspired educators in Turkey to be able raise their voices.

As many educators stated that the first aim during the pandemic was to stay with children instead of giving online instruction, "As early childhood educators, we must build and maintain close relationships with children and their families." stated by DiCarlo and Fazio-Brunson (2020, p. 64). DiCarlo and Fazio-Brunson continued, "We advised our families to create a low stress environment, establish and maintain a routine, stay socially connected. With family and friends, create learning opportunities within daily tasks and focus on the positive." (p. 64-65). Accordingly, it was good that 78% of educators participated in the current research worked hard to stay in touch with children and their families through online tools. On the other hand, they had many difficulties in providing both online/distance education and face-to-face education respectively during the pandemic.

Wasmuth (2020) states, "Young children are in danger of becoming collateral damage in the COVID19 pandemic. Institutions of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are closed and so are playgrounds, libraries and museums. Even play dates are out. Thus, young children are deprived of necessary social interactions." (p. 87). Parallel to the results of this research, the current research revealed that both public and private school educators suffered from difficulties in conducting online/distance education, such as less or no interaction through the screen. However, only a few of them agreed that online education was effective in supporting children's development and learning, (i.e., increasing children's self-regulation skills, individual work, active learning, and learning with nature, technology and home materials) while all agreed that face-to-face education was effective in supporting children's development and learning. Most of them stated varying difficulties and negative experiences of online education because of "Short attention span of young children," "Less interaction online," "More direct instruction/lecturing online," "Bored kids online," "Technological problems," "No hands-on education online," "Limited activities online," and "No actual involvement online." None of the difficulties stated by the participants is related to the other ways of distance education, but all of the difficulties stated are about online education. Actually, participants thought that online/distance education is suitable for children aged 6 and up. More specifically, 36% of the participants believe in 6 years and up, 30.5% of the participants believe in 5 years and up, 22.5% of the participants believe in 4 years and up, 8.4% of the participants believe in 3 years and up, and only 1.8% of the participants believe in that 0-2 years and up ages. The question "What is appropriate for young children regarding their education?" should be asked as well as "How do educators overcome difficulties in the New Normal?" Accordingly, educators should learn different ways of distance education as well as online education techniques like gamification (Samur, 2019) in early childhood to overcome the difficulties and handicaps of online education (e.g., limited attention span of young children, limited time for screen exposure and limited effectiveness of screen exposure in development of 21st century skills) and to provide more developmentally appropriate education (Copple & Bredekamp, 1987, 2009; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; WHO, 2019).

Young children need adult supervision and support while learning and they need to mentally and physically participate in activities so that they can enjoy and learn (Rankin, 2004). And that is only possible when they interact with materials and others in small groups. Otherwise, they get bored and lose their interest in the topic. The research conducted by Atmaca and Başbay (2020)

shows that small group activities in a Reggio Emilia-inspired school provide children with the ability to listen to others, get others to listen to them, and communicate in some other ways. However, the current study shows that online education given by the participants did not support any kind of group work and children had difficulty in paying attention to the topic. In the current study, some of the educators could not continue education during the pandemic or some of them could not provide education according to the principles they believed in, namely Reggio Emilia principles. Education was hindered by the pandemic.

Parallel to the findings of the current research about “technological problems” and “no actual involvement online” that disadvantaged families and children experienced, the Scottish Government Learning Directorate (2020) stressed that disadvantaged children and families require particular consideration during the pandemic because they are more at risk than ever. However, interestingly, only a few educators in the current research stated their concerns and worries about children at risk and children with special needs/rights, such as bad internet connection. Accordingly, the socio-economic status of families was so apparent during the pandemic in terms of the education of young children (Giannini & Grant Lewis, 2020; Reimers & Schleicher, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Similar research findings are found across the world for disadvantaged groups as a result of the social injustice and the misdistribution of money, power, and resources (Xafis, 2020) thus an action is needed to provide better education for young children at risk. It is not possible for educators to resolve technological problems like bad/no Internet connection or lack of technological equipment at home but they can make use of another way to conduct distance education as stated in Coldeway’s (1986) Quadrants, such as “students and the teacher are in the same place at different times” or “students and the teacher are in different places at different times” instead of sticking to only online education in which “students and the teacher are in different places at the same time.”

After passing the first months in which “urgent online education” was done, it was a must to conduct research on such difficulties and then look for solutions. Parallel to this idea, Louis-Jean and Cenat (2020) state, “This could intrinsically require educators to work with educational technology companies to figure out and develop the best instructional designs to make the best out of e-learning.” (p. 3). Similarly, Tria (2020), a researcher in Philippines, states, “Future studies are recommended such as planning and implementation strategy, assessing online learning systems to schools, a survey on online platforms, project proposals and capstone projects, program creation, community assessment, revision of curricula, development of instructional materials and many more.” (p. 3). It is clear that actions need to be taken on education practices. The current research shows that participants were happy to learn new types of education, work on their professional development, and be more knowledgeable about Reggio Emilia, which changed their understanding of early childhood education. They even stated that although education in the New Normal was challenging for them and the children, it was effective in terms of supporting their learning in any way.

The findings of the current research showed that some of the participants did face-to-face education after June 2020 through September 2020. It is found that educators and children used different methods/ways during those extraordinary times because of the pandemic. More specifically, they tried to do more frequent outside time than before because they believed that to have classes in open air is less risky during the pandemic. They started using protection equipment like face masks and keeping social distance to protect each other from spreading and getting coronavirus. They started using personalized materials instead of sharing materials. They started following hygiene rules in the school from hand-washing to keeping affected people away from the school and had fewer children in each classroom to have larger social distance. They removed risky or unnecessary materials from the school to have fewer materials in classrooms but provided children with their favorite materials. Similar measures have been taken in other countries to prevent the virus from spreading (Esposito, & Principi, 2020). Some of the participants did not only do face-to-face education but they used mixed education. In other words, 7.5% of the participants did both online/distance and face-to-face education at the same time and found it difficult to accomplish. Moreover, an educator stated, “We could not adapt to constant hand washing, working with a face mask and social distance.” However, all precautions should be included while handling education face-to-face according to the new regulations (Inan, 2020; MEB, 2020).

Reggio Emilia-inspired educators participating in the current research stated that they encountered the following difficulties in face-to-face education: “Fewer materials,” “No sharing allowed,” “No field-visits,” “Crowded classrooms,” “Difficulty in keeping children in front of the screen,” “Less space for each child,” “No outside opportunities, like a garden,” “Difficulty in finding tread of interest,” “Difficulty in keeping documentation,” “No ideas for provocation,” “Having both online and face-to-face education at the same time,” “Back to school/adaptation problems,” “Lack of knowledge in Reggio Emilia approach,” “Lack of support for children with special rights,” “Having difficulty in keeping social distance,” “Technology addiction in children after frequent use of online education” as well as having difficulty in conducting “Project-based education.” It is important to stress that there is no need for keeping children in front of the screen at school because they have already been exposed to the screen at home too much during the pandemic. Actually, it is better to keep children active instead of passive at school.

While most of the participants complained about difficulties they experienced during online/distance education, a comparatively fewer participants complained about difficulties they experienced in face-to-face education because of the COVID-19 pandemic. During face-to-face education, their problems focused on a wide range of scope, from having insufficient materials and space inside and outside the school to adaption problems to school after the long break because of the pandemic. However, it is interesting that some of the participants complained about some difficulties which are not related to the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, having difficulty in finding tread of interest, doing documentation and provocation, having lack of knowledge about Reggio Emilia in general and in education of children with special rights. In fact, as more than half (122) of the participants had less than a year of experience with Reggio Emilia, the challenges they faced may not be due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but simply from their low experience in Reggio Emilia approach.

Finally, while some of the participants stated that they did not have any support from families at all, some received both parental support – in terms of “Materials,” “Educational support,” “Technical support,” and “Hygiene,” – and others’ support, namely support from “Other educators in the school,” “Educational networks,” “Experts,” “Own family,” “Child’s other relatives,”

and “Online educational supports.” Rasmitadila et al. (2020) researched in Indonesia and stressed the importance of support from all stakeholders in the education of young children, namely, government, schools, teachers, parents, and the community. However, the participant educators in the current study stated that the only support providers for them were their school, children’s and their own families, and some volunteer/paid networks.

CONCLUSION

Reggio Emilia-inspired educators in Turkey had both technical and educational difficulties in conducting distance and face-to-face education effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic while some of them could not continue education at all. They were cognizant of new necessities that the New Normal has brought and open to professional development opportunities to adapt to the new world. Some were lucky to get support from outside for both professional development and personal issues during the pandemic while some were afraid of the coronaviruses and felt all alone being not a part of community of learning any more. However, the emergency has passed and people are ready to dig into reconceptualization of both distance education and face-to-face education in the New Normal. It is time to rethink about what we did in the past and make a plan for the present and the future. For example, educators should realize that online education (i.e., synchronous) is not the only way of conducting distance education (Berge & Mrozowski, 2001; Coldeway, 1986) but there are other types of distance education, which are more developmentally appropriate for young children and more inclusive for children at risk. Educators need to be more creative than before and look for new ways of teaching and learning. Parallel to the findings of the current research, Louis-Jean and Cenat (2020) and Tria (2020) state that educators need to work on revision of curricula and new educational materials/strategies to overcome the obstacles that occurred in the New Normal.

Similarly, in many countries like China and Georgia, schools are deploying innovative and renewed approaches in restructuring education (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2020). Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2020) state, during the COVID-19 pandemic “within the context of early education, pedagogy has become an obscure, sophisticated supplement of some sort rather than an indeterminate field of responsive, generative, and collaborative practice of interpretation, ethical critique, and invention.” (p. 628). Accordingly, education needs to be reconceptualized in the New Normal. There is a possibility of that the whole concept of education and care might change and early childhood education might be restructured in the New Normal abandoning the questionable parts of the current education system in Turkey. As stated by Wasmuth (2020),

“The thinking briefly outlined here – and the example of considering the child as an absolute other is only one of the numerous possibilities – would mean a huge shift in ECEC. However, such a utopia is needed. It is needed not only because past practices in ECEC have been harmful to too many young children, but also because the present crisis offers the opportunity for ECEC practitioners and philosophers to rethink what it means to educate and care for young children. It is the chance to find a genuine voice to not only to describe, analyse and defend the field of ECEC, but also to advocate for young children as absolute Others.” (p. 93).

Accordingly, in the New Normal, before restructuring education in Turkey, educators should answer the following five questions of early childhood education and care:

- 1- What should be given?
- 2- Why should it be given?
- 3- How should it be given?
- 4- To whom should it be given?
- 5- When should it be given?

As stated by Mutton (2020), “What is fascinating in this collection of papers, however, is the way in which so many teacher educators internationally have seen the current crisis as an opportunity to consider new ways of working, to adopt innovative approaches to pedagogy and to re-conceptualise the nature of their teacher education programmes” (p. n/a). Accordingly, educators should see the New Normal as a chance to rebuild early childhood education in Turkey upon more humanistic, more child-centered, more child-friendly, more freedom-oriented, more scientific evidence-based, more interest-based and more inquiry-based practices but less-directed and less-stressful practices. The importance of Reggio Emilia pedagogy has become more apparent during the pandemic because many of the necessities that occurred during the pandemic have already existed in Reggio Emilia. For example, children are used to working in small groups or by themselves without getting much help from the teacher and others. They use all parts of the school like patio/playground/garden/classroom/piazas and ateliers being not close to each other. Moreover, they are used to deciding on what to do and how to do something so that they can work even at home independently and creatively and so on. It is an urgent need for Reggio Emilia-inspired educators in Turkey to get together and co-think on Reggio Emilia approach and practices to be inspired.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this research, the following suggestions are developed for the participants:

- 1- Reggio Emilia-inspired educators should find theoretical solutions to the problems they experience and reconstruct their understanding of education in the New Normal. Because being Reggio Emilia-inspired means not copying educational materials of others but creating original projects based on the needs and interests of their school.
- 2- Reggio Emilia-inspired educators should check what Reggio Emilia teachers in Italy do in the New Normal so that they can see examples of projects and then create their own.
- 3- Reggio Emilia-inspired educators should work on both distance and face-to-face educational practices. Although education is face-to-face nowadays, the world might need to be shut down again because of the pandemic or another reason. It is necessary to be ready for online/distance education in case of emergencies that might occur again. Educators should learn different ways of distance education other than online education.
- 4- In fact, as many of the participants had less than a year of experience with Reggio Emilia, the challenges they faced may not be due to the pandemic, but simply from their low experience in Reggio Emilia approach, which is a new coming pedagogy to Turkey. Accordingly, they should also study Reggio Emilia pedagogy, not just the pedagogy in the New Normal.
- 5- Some educators stated that they are at risk because of the pandemic. It is essential to pay them what they worth, take measures to protect each other from spreading and getting coronavirus and keep social distancing and practicing coughing/sneezing etiquette.

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