Early Childhood Education During the COVID-19 Outbreak: The Perceived Changing Roles of Preschool Administrators, Teachers, and Parents

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Abstract
Stakeholders (teachers, preschool administrators, and parents) in early childhood education have struggled due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The present study explores the experiences and perceptions reflecting the perceived changes in the roles of stakeholders in early childhood education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. A criterion sample of two administrators, nine teachers, and seven parents in early childhood education institutions was interviewed. We used Moustakas’s (Phenomenological research methods, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1994) phenomenological method to collect, analyze, and validate the data. The main themes showed that: (1) Stakeholders have experienced substantial challenges in online education; (2) The online delivery of instructional content has changed the administrators' financing and instructional leadership role; (3) Teachers have acquired new roles in some areas such as communication, content development, and technology use. In addition, the mentoring roles and social responsibilities of administrators and teachers have increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic; and (4) Supporting roles towards their children have been proliferated and diversified. Overall, findings from the present study provided insights into the stakeholders' perceived accumulated and altered roles in early childhood education because of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Keywords Early childhood education · Administrative roles · COVID-19 · Online education

Introduction
Preschools were shut down in many countries in order to reduce the contagious effects of the COVID-19 virus that started in December 2019 and to relieve the healthcare systems. More than 90% of children have stayed away from schools due to countries' physical distancing policy (UNESCO, 2020). With the closure of schools, educators, students, and parents have faced various difficulties, and many countries have continued their educational activities in online environments using digital technologies (Spiteri, 2021; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Online teaching has been used as a substitute for in-class education due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and there has been a controversy over whether online teaching is beneficial for young children (Kim, 2020). In Turkey, the Ministry of National Education (MEB) announced that on March 12, 2020, preschools were to switch to online education, and educational activities should be provided through the television channels created by the Education Informatics Network (EBA). The MEB prepared the content of these digital educational activities, and children were asked to follow their classes on the EBA.

The closure of educational institutions and switching to online delivery of instructional activities were sudden changes for stakeholders and education systems. School closures have negatively affected children’s academic outcomes, mental health, and well-being (Engzell et al., 2021; Lee, 2020). Further, preschool closures may have put substantial
burdens on stakeholders of early childhood education, given educators and families involved in early childhood education have different roles in different areas such as learning, caring, and social support (Kostelnik & Grady, 2009; Van-denbroeck et al., 2013; Van Laere et al., 2012). In addition, teachers’ use of online teaching methods requires them to take on new roles (Kalogiannakis, 2010). Therefore, online teaching/learning practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed the roles of stakeholders in early childhood education. For instance, some school administrators in the US distributed food and computers to families and students during the pandemic and provided psychological support to students via e-mail (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). From the Ecological Systems Theory perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), children’s development and education improve through bidirectional interactions between the child and their environment. In addition, the quality of interactions between different contexts also undermines or supports children's developmental and educational outcomes. From this perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic may have brought some changes within- and between-systems that children’s educational processes and development are affected through these changes. In detail, by utilizing Ecological Systems Theory, we aimed to explore the experiences reflecting both within-context (e.g., in homes and schools) and between-contexts (e.g., home-school interactions) during the COVID-19 pandemic. While Ecological Systems Theory provided a theoretical framework for the current study, it also set up a clear lens by which we were able to capture broader and integrative experiences of stakeholders in early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood education stakeholders have not yet been revealed, it is important to understand how this process could affect stakeholders’ access to the resources that preschools have been providing (Lee, 2020). The evidence is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has created inequality among children’s access to educational resources (Armitage & Nellums, 2020) and disruptions in within-family and preschool-family relationships (O’Connor et al., 2021). Capturing and understanding stakeholders’ experiences in early childhood education has become essential to reveal undermining factors of the functioning of stakeholders in early childhood education. Considering the changes in the roles of the stakeholders in early childhood education, we aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions reflecting the perceived changes in the roles of stakeholders in early childhood education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. In the current study, early childhood education institutions are conceptualized as preschools serving children from 3 to 6 years old. There has been a paucity of studies revealing the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the functioning and structure of educational institutions (Kim, 2020; Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). From this perspective, the findings from the current study will contribute to the field of early childhood education by providing insights regarding stakeholders’ changing roles in early childhood education.

Roles of Stakeholders in Early Childhood Education Administrators’ Roles

Administrators in preschools serve the vision and mission of the preschool, motivate teachers working for and children attending to the preschool, and create a positive preschool atmosphere (Hess & Kelly, 2007). These roles may vary depending on the country and policies in place. For example, administrators in public schools in Turkey focus more on financial problems in terms of securing financial support (Yıldız & Balyer, 2019). In Finland, on the other hand, school administrators attach more importance to sharing their leadership roles and responsibilities with other stakeholders (Greatbatch & Tate, 2018). Further, it is more important for school administrators in Chile and Cuba to support teachers and participate more in classroom inspections (Flessa et al., 2018).

Preschool administrators are required to have qualified management and leadership understanding in order to create a comprehensive, consistent, and quality educational process (Goffin & Washington, 2007; Reid, 2021). Further, preschool administrators need to create a suitable environment for the multifaceted development of children, to support change in the preschool environment, enable children to have different learning experiences by establishing social networks, create developmentally appropriate curricula, and provide the necessary conditions for quality child care (Cunningham, 2020). Overall, administrators are considered to be working towards supporting children’s development and learning in early childhood education in many ways.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed some challenges and changes to the roles of preschool administrators. It has been shown that administrators have played a critical role in providing the infrastructure of preschools for online teaching and learning and supporting teachers for healthy functioning in their teaching. In one study, researchers showed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, some school administrators in the US have worked with telecommunications companies to provide internet to students, distributed food to families, laptops, and tablets to students, provided psychological support to students via e-mail, and constantly communicated with families. (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). On that ground, we explored the preschool administrators’ perceptions of their roles during the COVID-19 outbreak.
Teachers' Roles

Teachers involved in early childhood education have different roles than teachers in other education levels. Kostelnik and Grady (2009) state that a preschool teacher's role is to teach and facilitate children's learning by providing emotional support and guidance. Further, Van Laere et al. (2012) reported that teachers in early childhood education have multifaceted roles, such as supporting the child's whole development, monitoring children's development and learning, and creating a connection between parents and preschool.

The unanticipated transition to distance education due to the pandemic has created "emergency e-Learning" (Murphy, 2020, p. 492) which has created challenges for teachers, such as supporting both children and parents in children's learning and development (Judd et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). This sudden transition may require a reexamination of teachers' roles and competencies, which may pave the way for teacher education programs to design appropriate approaches and practices for online teaching and learning in early childhood education (Kim, 2020).

Parents' Roles

In general, parents have an instrumental role in helping their children achieve the learning outcomes determined by teachers and support home-based learning and development (Vandenbroeck et al., 2013). Parents' involvement in their children's educational process is related to children's positive social and academic outcomes (Ahmetoglu et al., 2020; Crosby et al., 2014). On that ground, teachers focus on establishing collaboration with parents to support children's development and learning during preschool years (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2008).

The COVID-19 outbreak has further increased the burden on parents as their involvement heightened in children's daily functioning. Findings from previous studies during the COVID-19 have shown that parents' daily routines and functioning have changed, and their participation in their children's educational process has substantially increased (Toran et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2020). From this perspective, it is important to understand how parents of young children handle the ongoing needs in their children’s educational process.

The Present Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a burden on all stakeholders of early childhood education; however, little is known about how the pandemic may have changed the perceptions of these stakeholders about early childhood education in Turkish preschool contexts. On that ground, we aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions reflecting the perceived changes in the roles of stakeholders in early childhood education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. Understanding the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders would help researchers and policymakers to improve the quality of their programs supporting these stakeholders within early childhood education. Correspondingly, our central research question was how did early childhood education stakeholders in Turkey perceive and experience changes in their roles due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

The Rationale for Phenomenological Study

We intended to explore the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders in early childhood education in the current study by utilizing the qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological research focuses on exploring individual or individuals' experiences of defined phenomena commonly experienced by the participants (Creswell, 2013; Lichtman, 2013). Creswell (2013) emphasized that the purpose of phenomenology is grasping the essence of the phenomena experienced by participants. Briefly, we explored and described the "essence" of experiences of stakeholders in early childhood in terms of "how" and "why" (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

Criterion sampling is used to investigate all individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The main criterion for sampling in the current study was being a stakeholder (parent, teacher, or preschool administrator) in early childhood. Aligned with this criterion, we contacted two preschools (one private and one public) serving children from the age of three to five years in Istanbul. Children attended the preschools half-day for 5 days a week. The reason for choosing Istanbul was its high population, and the adverse effects of the pandemic may have hit this city worse than other cities in Turkey. Of these participants, two were preschool principals (one male), nine were teachers (two males and five of them were from public preschools), and seven were parents (all mothers and four of them were from public preschools). The female principal had four years, and the male principal had 19 years of administration experience. Teachers' years of experience ranged from 3.5 years to 25 years.

Data Collection Tool and Procedures

We obtained permission for the study protocol from the Ministry of National Education. Each participant was asked for their consent before the interviews. One-on-one interviews
were conducted via telephone or Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked each participant a set of semi-structured interview questions to gain information about their perceptions of the phenomenon. Considering participants' identity protection and confidentiality, we used pseudonyms for participants. We used a semi-structured interview form, which provided guidelines for the interview. We developed questions based on previous theoretical conceptualizations and empirical studies (ERG, 2020; Gol-Guven et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020; Toran et al., 2020), and we had pilot interviews to finalize the interview questions. Each interview was about 30 minutes long. See “Appendix A” for detailed interview questions.

Data Analysis

In a phenomenological study, the researcher objectively focuses on how participants' experiences occur in real life; namely, the researcher should read between the lines to conceptualize participants' experiences (Sanders, 1982). We followed Moustakas's (1994) procedures to conceptualize participants' experiences according to the research framework and purpose. First, we transcribed all audiotaped interviews and then organized data by matching participants' names with pseudonyms to consider ethical concerns. The phenomenon was described in-depth to set aside our personal experiences regarding the phenomena. This process is called epoche-bracketing, which occurs as "investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination" (Creswell, 2013. p. 80). In the epoche process, researchers as experts in the field of education and former teachers, attempted to reduce their personal and occupational biases and perceptions in the coding and interpretations of participants' discourses regarding the educational process. For example, if we, as researchers, had a similar negative experience with school administration in an educational process, we were not inclined to code or interpret participants' experiences from a negative perspective; instead, we approached them as they were. Second, significant statements relevant to experiences towards the phenomenon were listed. This process is called horizontalization, which might be conceptualized as highlighting significant statements and words that reflect the understanding of participants' experiences towards the phenomenon. Third, we eliminated insignificant statements and meaning units from the listed statements by using Moustakas's (1994) criteria. Finally, we provided the textural description of the experience, meaning that 'what' the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon and provided examples of it (Creswell, 2013, p. 193). Then, we provided the structural description of the experience, meaning 'how' the experience happened (Creswell, 2013, p. 194). After all these structural and textural descriptions, we created a "composite description" incorporating textural and structural descriptions, presenting the phenomenon's essence (Creswell, 2013). Researchers ensured the validity of findings by engaging in reflexivity as described in the bracketing-epoche-process. In addition, in each phase of coding and creating meaningful units, the first and the second authors collaborated to reach an agreement on the coding of the verbatim statements of participants. When disagreement was present, they deeply discussed the categorization of the statement by bringing in the third author as an independent observer of the categories. This process continued until agreement was achieved.

Findings

We introduced the themes first and then corresponding categories under each theme in presenting the findings. See Table 1 for the organization of the themes and categories. The first theme is Perceived Roles, and its categories are supporter, financial provider, and caregiver. The second theme was Out-of-Preschool Education, and its categories are online education and physical distance. The third theme is Changing Roles, and its categories are teachers' roles, administrators' roles, and parents' roles. The first theme represents the perceived roles of stakeholders in general, independent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second and the third themes represent the perceptions and experiences of participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 1: Perceived Roles

This theme represents perceptions of teachers, preschool administrators, and parents about their roles in early childhood education.

| Categories          | Perceived roles | Out-of-preschool education | Changing roles         |
|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Supporter           |                 | Online education            | Teachers' roles        |
| Financial provider  |                 | Physical distance           | Administrators' roles  |
| Caregiver           |                 |                             | Parents' roles         |
Supporter

Most teachers stated their roles as socializers for child behavior and supporting children's self-care and development. We conceptualized this category as a supporter because teachers repeatedly referred to themselves as mother, father, sister, friend, and caregiver while describing their roles. Here is an excerpt from Teacher Elif to illustrate this theme.

Children need direction. Sometimes we teach them how to play. Sometimes we become their psychologists. Sometimes we become their friends, sometimes we become their parents, and sometimes we become their teachers. So, our role varies a lot. I think we are responsible for the preschool, administrators, and parents. Parents entrust their most valuable assets to us. As seen in this example, Teacher Elif emphasized the variety and vitality of her role by stating that "Parents expect everything from us. They can treat teachers as caregivers and often hold them accountable". This perception reveals the pressure and expectation of parents about teacher roles. Overall, teachers perceived themselves as guardians of children, preschool work facilitators, and parents and students' mentors.

Financial Provider

There were differences between perceptions of private and public preschools' administrators. As seen in the example below, principal Ali from the public preschool emphasized that his role was primarily related to preschool finances.

.... Purchasing preschool materials, paying salaries of janitors and clerical workers, and most importantly, finding financial resources for the preschool. ... our priority in public preschools is to find financial resources.

On the other hand, principal Sena from the private preschool emphasized that her role was primarily related to the educational activities of the preschool. The excerpt below shows her perceptions.

[Preschool principals] should help and guide their team, share their experiences with the employees, and listen to the problems of their team. They should focus on children's academic education and life skills by putting the children at the center. In other words, a preschool principal should be an understanding, guiding supervisor, coordinating everything like a ship captain, and giving feedback on things they see negatively.

In this category, the principal in the public preschool perceived himself as a financial provider and a person who maintains the official business in the preschools. On the other hand, the private-preschool administrator instead emphasized the instructional leadership through which she creates a positive climate among all stakeholders in the preschool.

Caregiver

Parents perceived themselves as ones who provided for their children and shared the burden of teachers in preschool education. Parent Ayşe stated her role as follows:

I was helping my child at home as well. When the teacher assigns homework, my child tells me, "Mom, let's do it." We paint together. Sometimes I was helping my child see different things outside of preschool. We play games, and we learn numbers.

A majority of parents stated similar roles for themselves. This perception may show that parents perceive that they have a role to support their children's preschool work and help their children with daily routines. Interestingly, parents perceived themselves as those who follow their children's homework and classes.

Theme 2: Out-of-Preschool Education

This theme represents educational activities performed out of the preschool context due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties experienced in this process.

Online Education

Teachers stated that they moved all their teaching activities to online platforms, which has been changeling for them as children in this developmental period require in-person social interactions. The Ministry of Education provided teachers with several online teaching platforms such as EBA and EBA TV, albeit this was not true for all preschools. In addition, teachers attempted to contact parents about their children's learning activities. Teacher Hasan expressed his views on this subject as follows;

During distance education, I sent activities to parents via WhatsApp. They did these activities together with their children. Sometimes, I communicated with the children by phone. As they were young, I could only indulge in little talk like "How are you?", "Are you OK?" or "What are you doing?" Since our activities are not suitable for live classes, I did not have live classes.

Teachers also utilized online platforms to communicate with one another, as Teacher Melike stated in her interview:
We were in frequent contact with the teachers and administrators at the preschool. We held online meetings to share our activities and motivate each other.

Although teachers repeatedly talked about the benefits of online platforms to their teaching, they also expressed their concerns that preschool children might experience screen addiction while using digital tools during the distance education process, these opinions were gathered under the category of screen addiction.

**Physical Distance**

This category contains the difficulties experienced in distance education. Teachers stated that distance education activities were not of sufficient quality and expressed that they could not insure children’s readiness for primary school. Teacher Aysel and Elif expressed their views on this matter respectively as follows:

Distance education in preschool was more difficult than other levels as they were young children in terms of development. Since we were not face-to-face, they thought of themselves as having activities at home with their parents. For preschoolers, face-to-face education is more important than anything else because it is important to meet their eyes and explore their talents together.

Participation in distance education has gradually decreased. Parents attached more importance to the classes of their other children. ...I tried to have live classes, but the children did cooperate, and they always spoke in unison disruptive manner...

Overall, all teachers were concerned that physically-distance education was inefficient due to the developmental stages of preschool children, which ended up that they did not find enough support from parents, there was no supportive classroom environment, some parents did not have technological resources, and children’s attendance to online education had decreased over time.

Many of the teachers stated that the Ministry of National Education (MEB) did not support preschool institutions during distance education or provide them with technological support, resulting in inequality for parents without financial means to find materials for their children’s learning. Teacher Cansu emphasized this concern by stating that “[the Ministry of Education] has not done any work in the preschool field. We were treated like stepchildren. They discarded us.” Some parents asked the teachers to keep children busy until evening.

First of all, we are exhausted. It wasn’t easy to hold online meetings and deliver information instantly. We also had difficulty using digital tools. For example, it was challenging to celebrate and manage the April 23 celebration online. The parents called us all the time. They called us mostly to ask for the private school fee back. The parents were very hasty on this, and our preschool fell into great financial difficulties.

Preschool administrators additionally stated that they generally experienced financial difficulties during the pandemic. In particular, private preschools were put in a difficult position by the parents demanding their tuition fees be reimbursed. Again, administrators struggled with some difficulties such as adapting to technology, developing digital content, coordinating distance education activities, and providing support to parents without financial means. On the other hand, parents complained about being alone with their children at home all the time and did not find distance education satisfactory. Two excerpts below showed how administrators experienced the pandemic process in distance education.

People did not pay their fees. We called the parents to collect the fees, we almost begged them. We had a tough time economically. [The Ministry of Education] MEB did not allocate any funds, either. (Principal Ali)

The pandemic process affected all preschool stakeholders unfamiliar with distance education activities. Teachers had difficulty developing content and providing the necessary support to children and felt technologically inadequate. Administrators especially experienced financial problems.

**Theme 3: Changing Roles**

This theme presents the changes experienced in the roles of stakeholders in preschool education due to the transformations in education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Teachers’ Roles**

Teachers stated various changes in their responsibilities and roles as children moved away from the classroom environment and stayed home with their parents during the pandemic. Teacher Mehmet emphasized changes in his role by stating the following views.

We had to redo everything. We switched to distance education for the first time...We have moved too far from the classroom environment. While in the classroom, you can control the child with your facial expressions, but you cannot establish this connection in the online classroom atmosphere. I constantly sought what
I could do it while doing live classes. I cannot establish control in distance education.

Another perceived change in the teachers' role was how teachers communicated with parents to support child development and learning. During the pandemic, teachers provided psychological support to parents and children and tried to reassure them about the continuum of the educational process. In addition, teachers experienced new roles such as monitoring the health status of families, and Teacher Aysel commented on this changed role as follows:

We were asking whether the families had certain diseases or not, and we were observing and following them if any. Due to the disease, they [the school administrators] gave us such a responsibility. When partial in-person education started, we tried to help children with hygiene rules and social distancing. Kindergarten children want to hug and touch each other. Our responsibility on this matter has increased.

In addition to teachers, principals also stated that there had been changes in the roles of teachers. The main changes to the roles of teachers perceived by school administrators were about teachers' technology usage skills and changed dynamics in establishing communication with parents and colleagues. Teachers also were the ones who provided psychological and social support for the other stakeholders in the educational process.

Although it appeared that the majority of teachers perceived substantial changes in their roles, one teacher argued that there had been no change in his roles and stated that only the workload of teachers had increased. He emphasized his argument by stating:

Normally, we would play games in the classroom, and now we play music and games on the screen. We even did audio activities. But we would do these in the classroom anyway. I don't think this process has changed the role of teachers. I just think it adds something to the teachers. We have realized that the preschool is not just a classroom, it is not a closed place, and processes are managed from the outside as well.

**Administrators’ Roles**

Administrators also perceived some changes in their roles of running preschools due to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, there were differences in experiences and perceptions between school administrators running public and private preschools. The principal from the public preschool stated that:

Unlike the normal process...We were in a challenging financial situation; we called the parents to collect the fees, we almost begged them. In other words, we acted like an accountant or even a beggar. We had to come to preschool every day. We had parents who did not use a smartphone and did not have a computer at home. We reached out to them and tried to support them in some way. Sometimes people were very panicked because of the disease. Our frightened parents called the preschool, and we tried to reassure them by telling them that this was not something to be too afraid of. I also tried to help with the disease. As a matter of fact, the governor's office formed a team of preschool principals. We went to the homes of those with the COVID positive test results to see if they were at home one by one. We have conducted informative events on the pandemic in our neighborhood.

As shown in the verbatim transcript above, the principal undertook various duties with distance education and the neighborhood where the preschool was located. Stating that technological leadership roles have diversified throughout distance education, principals have tried different communication methods to involve all stakeholders in the process. Principal Ali has also expressed that he had tried to provide moral and psychological support to parents concerning the pandemic and that the preschool faculty has taken an active role in informing the community and fighting the pandemic. The principal also emphasized that the preschool’s financial burdens were entirely up to him, stressing his changing role in preschool finances with "beggar" and "accountant" analogies.

Principal Sena, working in the private preschool, on the other hand, stated that:

We had to hold online meetings. We used digital tools as much as possible to communicate accurate information to teachers and parents. Doing some activities online puts a strain on us. For example, we held the April 23 celebration [official observance of Children's Day in Turkey], kindergarten graduation, welcome to the primary preschool event online, but as an administrator, this was a process I was not get used to at all. The positive aspect of the process was that it allowed us to be intertwined with technology.

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We have increased our technological competence by necessity. We have searched for different methods to keep the student in front of the screen. Again, we have had experiences aimed at ensuring the socialization of children.

Principal Sena stated that technological leadership characteristics had improved in the distance education process. They had tried different methods to enhance students' social and academic skills in front of the screen. Again, the principal stated that she struggled to manage the preschool
funding process due to the sudden reimbursement of private preschool fees. She tried to convince parents and use different financial resources to overcome challenges during the pandemic. Teachers similarly stated that there had been changes in the role of preschool administrators by referring to the notion that communication between parents and administrators was increased for reducing the negative consequences of the pandemic process.

Parents’ Roles

Due to the pandemic, the perceived roles of parents in preschool education have also changed. A majority of parents perceived that their educator-caregiver roles have increased as children stayed at home during quarantine. Two parents below exemplified the change in their roles.

We tried to learn more because the children stayed at home. Children were a little bored at home because we could not get out. We tried to do different exercises. For example, I taught numbers and how to add numbers. We did activities together. I had my child do things, like writing down numbers from 1 to 100 or adding them. This also went beyond the activities provided by the teacher. (Mother Sıla)

At home, my child was not acting as they would in the classroom. My child listens willingly to the classes taught by the teacher, but they do not listen to the lessons I teach. I tried to become a teacher at home. In the first days, we were able to review our classes, but as time went on, my child thought the preschool was completely finished and not going on, and they started to be a little lax. (Mother Gizem)

Throughout distance education, it appears that parents have tried to fill in the gap of in-person education and lack-of-teachers in their homes.

In addition to parents’ support for their children’s learning and development, teachers also attempted to guide parents’ involvement in children’s learning activities. Teacher Cansu stated that they had tried to involve parents in educational activities with simple materials.

I have sent simple activities that children can do at home with their mothers. I wanted mothers to have spaces to spend time with their children at home with simple materials and simple topics. I wanted mothers not to think about what to do today because the pandemic was a very new situation for them, too.

It appears that there have been significant substantial perceived changes in the roles of all the stakeholders of early childhood education. Online tools have been perceived by teachers as instrumental in changing teachers’ technological skills, methods, and techniques they implement as part of their roles. Teachers also perceived that their role in communication has also changed due to the pandemic. Teachers have monitored the impact of the pandemic on families and provided psychological support. Administrators, similarly, have had roles guiding and providing social support to parents. In addition, administrators experienced financial difficulties in preschools and battled against it, which reflected their changing role in education. Distance education has led parents to take on new responsibilities, reflecting teacher-like roles in addition to caregiving.

Discussion

In the current study, we explored the experiences and perceptions reflecting the perceived changes in the roles of stakeholders in early childhood education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. We organized the discussion in such a way that it reflects the perceived roles of the stakeholders in early childhood and then how these perceived roles have changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we discussed each finding by providing a detailed description and explanation. We attempted to frame our discussion around the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) by deeply discussing the themes reflecting experiences within context (e.g., preschool or home) and between contexts (teacher-parent interactions). By doing so, we believe that the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders in early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic emerged through interactive reflections of micro, meso, and exo-systems.

Teachers perceived their roles as providing support for children and mentoring parents in their children’s learning process. This finding is congruent with the previous conceptualization (Saracho & Spodek, 2003), stating that the roles of teachers in early childhood education are to determine students’ needs, create a fun and engaging learning environment, and enable students to socialize. In addition to teachers, the perceived roles of private and public preschool administrators showed differences. The public preschool administrator perceived himself as more of a manager than a leader and emphasized his role in preschool funding. However, a private preschool administrator perceived herself as more in teaching leadership and creating a positive learning climate in the preschool. This difference could be explained by the notion that administrators in public preschools in Turkey are required to focus more on financing problems in preschools and devote most of their working hours to source-finding for the preschool. On the contrary, private preschools could have their financial resources and allocate administrative tasks to other preschool-related issues (Yıldız & Balyer, 2019).
All of the stakeholders in the current study perceived that the educational process during the COVID-19 pandemic was not efficient for children’s learning and placed a substantial burden on all stakeholders. Some of the difficulties experienced in online education included a lack of technological facilities, teachers’ difficulty developing content and using digital tools, lack of infrastructure, financial problems, and escalated parenting tasks at home.

Stakeholders in early childhood education also perceived that there had been changes in their roles due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Acquisition of new technological skills for online courses and initiatives to develop digital content have changed teachers’ pre-pandemic roles. Teachers and administrators have taken on new roles by following the health status of families and taking part in the social struggle against the pandemic. Both teachers and administrators have provided more psychological support and guidance to parents and children compared to the pre-pandemic era. The quality of adaptation to changing dynamics of the educational process could help teachers provide more efficient and quality education for children (Kostelnik & Grady, 2009). Kim (2020) stated that teacher training programs should be rearranged, as further involvement of technology in educational activities and more frequent occurrence of sudden social transformations such as with COVID-19 will further diversify the roles of preschool teachers. The difficulties experienced by early childhood education teachers while using technological tools may come from the fact that they have not received adequate training on the use of these tools during their training (Kalogiannakis, 2010). Developing the technological infrastructure of preschools and increasing digital materials for teachers can make distance education processes more successful.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth new risks for preschool children. Administrators have assumed new technological leadership roles to minimize these emerging risks. For instance, administrators have sought new ways to keep preschool traditions alive such as graduation and award ceremonies, which are all part of in-person education. Again, administrators have tried different methods to improve children’s social and academic skills online and to coordinate teachers by transferring their administrative roles to digital platforms. Nevertheless, the pandemic process has shown that adaptive roles and responsibilities of administrators and teachers in preschools are critical to sustained functioning in education (Acar et al., 2021; Yıldırım, 2021).

In addition to teachers and preschool administrators, parents also experienced additional roles such as being teachers for their children at home besides their caregiving roles. The evidence is clear by now that parents’ involvement in children’s development and learning, particularly in difficult times, could provide extra support for children’s healthy development and education (Forbes et al., 2021; Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009). This support indeed becomes more effective when teachers and parents are allies in supporting children’s development and learning (Acar et al., 2021).

Considering findings from the current study in the context of the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we were able to understand experiences reflecting both within-context (e.g., home and schools) and between-contexts (e.g., home-school interactions) of stakeholders in early childhood education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, differences and similarities of experiences among stakeholders reflected and supported the theoretical notion that utilizing integrative exploration of experiences brings out a broader and comprehensive picture of the researched phenomenon. Overall, the findings reflected that all stakeholders in early childhood education experienced changes in their roles as consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes were also substantial adaptation tools for stakeholders to align with the emerging requirements of the pandemic process for effective and healthy functioning.

Limitations

This study has some limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, although representing public and private preschools, we only had two preschool administrators, which may have limited the representation of diverse perceptions. Second, all participants were from one city, which has limited various perceptions across Turkey to be represented. Third, we only used interviews for data collection, which could threaten the triangulation of qualitative data. Future research may use diverse data collection tools such as document analysis and observations. Finally, children are one of the main stakeholders of early childhood education; however, we did not interview them in the current study due to the allocation of resources. Future work should consider including children’s voices in their findings.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Early Childhood Education During the COVID-19 Outbreak: The Perceived Changing Roles of School Administrators, Teachers, and Parents

Preschool Principal Interview Form

I. Opening questions
I. What would you like to say about your preschool and your preschool teachers at your preschool?

II. Research questions

(1) What kind of roles do you think you had as a preschool principal in the period before the Coronavirus pandemic?
(2) What type of activities did you do during the online education process due to the pandemic?
(3) Different from the educational activities in the regular process, how has your role as a preschool principal changed in the online education process? Did you do something you had never done as a principal before? If yes, what and why did you do so?
(4) Can you tell us about your relationship with your preschool teachers during the distance education process? Do you think there has been a change in the role of teachers during the pandemic? How?
(5) During the online education process, how have your relationships with preschool children and their parents changed? Do you think there has been a change in the roles of parents? How?
(6) Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

Teacher Interview Form

I. Opening questions

1. What would you like to say about your profession and preschool children in general?

II. Research questions

(1) What kind of roles do you think you had as a teacher in the period before the Coronavirus pandemic?
(2) What type of activities did you do during the online education process due to the pandemic?
(3) How has your role as a teacher changed in the online education process, unlike regular educational activities? Is there any type of work you have never done as a teacher before but you are doing now? Why?
(4) Can you tell us about your relationship with your preschool teachers during the distance education process? Do you think there has been a change in the role of teachers during the pandemic? How?
(5) During the online education process, how did your relationships with children/parents in your classroom change during online education? What type of activities did parents in your classroom do during the process? Have you observed a difference in the role of the parents of children? How?
(6) Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

Parent Interview Form

I. Opening questions

1. What would you like to say about the preschool that your child is attending and your child in general?

II. Research questions

(1) What kind of work were you doing about your child's education as a parent in the time before the Coronavirus pandemic?
(2) What would you like to say about the online education process carried out due to the pandemic? What type of activities have you done during this period?
(3) As a parent with a young child during the pandemic, what kind of changes have occurred in your roles in taking care of and supporting your child's education when you think about the before and after the pandemic? Why?
(4) Unlike regular times, has there been a change in your communication with your child's teacher during the online education process?
(5) What kind of work did your child's teacher and preschool administration do during the online education process?
(6) Have your relationships with other parents changed during online education? How?
(7) Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

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