

ARTICLE HISTORY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Examining first-grade teachers' experiences and approaches regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning

Elif Mercan Uzun  · Eda Butun Kar  · Yusuf Ozdemir 

ABSTRACT

Background/purpose – Elementary school first-grade is very important, particularly in Turkey where preschool education is not compulsory. For students who have not received preschool education or those with low levels of preparedness, starting elementary school can be very challenging process. These difficulties have increased with the implementation of emergency distance education due to the pandemic. This study aims to determine the difficulties that first-grade elementary school teachers have faced during the pandemic.

Materials/methods – Phenomenological study, as one of the qualitative research methods, was applied in the current study. A semi-structured interview form was prepared as a data collection tool, and then interviews were conducted with 15 first-grade elementary school teachers.

Results – The study analyzed problems experienced during the emergency distance education program under the categories of focusing, learning losses, homework, textbooks, curriculum, equipment problems, screen time, hardware deficiencies, Internet access, connectivity problems, absenteeism, communication problems, home conditions, expectations from the state, inadequate family support, and security problems. It also examined problems experienced during the face-to-face training process under the categories of facemasks, social distancing, hygiene, adaptation problems, socialization, and parents.

Conclusion – The most significant problem that the participant teachers experienced during the emergency distance education was reported to be the learning losses of students. The other problems were determined to be the long periods of time students spent in front of a screen, educational materials not having been prepared for distance education, and not providing teachers with fundamental necessities for lessons such as Internet connectivity. In face-to-face education, the anxiety caused by fear of contracting the virus, and the difficulties of students to adapt to face-to-face education was seen to negatively affect the teachers.

Keywords – COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, elementary school first-grade, distance education, face-to-face education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As has been well-established, the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in late 2019, still profoundly affects much of daily life worldwide. Although the measures introduced to prevent the spread of the virus have varied from country to country, practices such as social distancing being made compulsory and the use of facemasks, restricting travel arrangements, applying curfews, and isolating individuals with COVID-related health issues as well as those with whom they have been in contact with, are still prominent even today. In addition, the closing of institutions where social distancing rules would be difficult to adhere to or manage/enforce, and where individuals are likely to frequently be in close contact with others has become one of the main topics of conversation; and with schools, as well as many workplaces, forced to remain closed, and with face-to-face education suspended almost across the board. In more than 190 countries, more than 1.57 billion students have been affected by school closures, whilst in Turkey, this number equates to about 25 million students (Alper, 2020; United Nations Children's Emergency Fund, 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020).

In Turkey, on March 13, 2020, a formal suspension of face-to-face education in schools was announced. In the first stage, the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE) announced that remedial training would be conducted over the Internet using the national Education Information Network (known as the EBA), and also through the TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) channels on national television. On March 23, 2020, students in Turkey started receiving distance education by watching lecture videos that followed the national curriculum according to their grade level on both EBA's website and TRT EBA TV (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Turkish Ministry of National Education], 2021).

Distance education is a form of institution-based formal education wherein the connection of students, teachers, and resources is ensured through interactive communication systems (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009). There are four basic components mentioned in the definition of distance education: that it is institution-based, that the teacher and students are in physically separate locations, that interactive communication tools are employed, and that the connection between students, teachers, and digital resources (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009) are ensured. Simonson et al. (2011) pointed to interaction being a significant part of distance education, just as in face-to-face education. Interaction may be as part of synchronous lessons, where students and their teachers all participate in the lesson at the same time, as well as in asynchronous lessons where students attend the lesson at their convenience (Demir, 2014). In Turkey, the MoNE applied the asynchronous distance education teaching and learning model shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic. However, in the asynchronous model, interaction between students and teachers is not synchronous (Bahçekapılı, 2015), and serious limitations to this model have been reported in terms of the amount and quality of interaction (Midkiff & Dasiva, 2000).

Due to the continuation of the pandemic, the new academic year (2020-2021) also started off according to the distance education model. An additional program of education was implemented between August 31 and September 18, 2020, aimed at addressing learning deficiencies that may conceivably accrued during the previous interrupted semester and which may have detrimentally affected the students' readiness to move up to the next grade. In Turkey, the first group to restart face-to-face learning during the pandemic period was for preschool and elementary school first-grade students. On September 21, 2020, preschool students and elementary school first-graders recommenced face-to-face

education, with the students in these classes divided into groups according to social distancing protocols for just 1 day's attendance during the first week. In the second week of face-to-face education, where participation incidentally was not made compulsory, the duration of the students' education was increased to 2 days, but limited to 5 course hours per day (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Turkish Ministry of National Education], 2021). As children always need time to adapt to their new environment when starting school, the first week was reserved exclusively for the adaptation of new students to school.

When first starting school, the people that children encounter, the environment, and the things they are expected to do are all very different, although they are expected to overcome these various issues in time. The degree of harmony amongst the cognitive, affective, social, physical characteristics, and learning needs of children, and the qualities required from the learning environment determines the child's ability to adapt to school life (Spencer, 1999). Studies have shown strong links between children's adaptation to school and their academic achievement, their socioeconomic status in their future lives, dropping out from education, class repetition, attendance, attitudes toward learning, and academic motivation (Murray et al., 2008; Spencer, 1999; van den Oord & van Rossem, 2002). Adaptation to school, which has a considerable influence on children's future lives, can be affected by many different factors; the first of these being factors related to their family situation, which can directly or indirectly affect the child's adaptation to school. These factors include the overdependence of the child on the mother, excessive expectations of the family regarding the child's starting school, pregnancy of the mother, death of a family member, family-related problems, the socioeconomic and sociocultural level of the family, neglect or abuse of the child, parental attitudes, family structure, school-family relations, and families not adequately preparing their children for school (Akçınar, 2013; Gülay Ogelman & Erten Sarıkaya, 2013; Perry & Weinstein, 1998; Spencer et al., 2001).

Another important factor in the child's adaptation to school is the relationship with their teacher (Baker, 2006; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd, 1990). An approachable teacher who stays in contact with the children in their care can help support the children's adaptation to school. Children who have good relationships with their teachers build trust with them and adapt more easily to the school environment. However, problems or lack of communication between a teacher and a child may cause the child to feel lonely at school, to have negative feelings towards the school, and to want to stay away from school (Birch & Ladd, 1997). In addition to the relationship between teacher and child, one other significant factor affecting a child's adaptation to school is the relationships they have with their peers (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Buhs, 2005; Gülay, 2011; Gülay Ogelman & Erten Sarıkaya, 2013; Ladd, 1990; Ladd et al., 1997; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). It is easier for children to adapt to school where they enjoy good relations with their peers, and who are readily accepted by their peers. During their school years, children spend much of their time with their peers; hence, children who are unable to establish healthy peer relationships are liable to be left alone at school, experience anxiety level increases, or they are excluded from the "crowd." It may be said that children with positive friendships are more social, and can therefore readily adapt to new situations more easily. In a study by Ladd (1990), it was stated that adapting to school involves not only meeting academic demands, but also making friends. Guay et al. (1999) stated that children who experience problems with their peer relationships might also experience attention-related problems or exhibit destructive or inappropriate behaviors in the classroom. During the pandemic, inevitably, the relationships

that children established with their peers and teachers were far removed from what was considered “normal” during face-to-face education.

As of September 28, 2020, elementary school first-grade students increased their face-to-face education up to 2 days per week. Overall, the students received three Turkish lessons 2 days a week, one Mathematics lesson 2 days a week, and one Life Science lesson 2 days a week, totaling five lessons per day, with non-face-to-face lessons conducted through the national distance education system which offered live classroom activities via EBA TV and the EBA portal (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Turkish Ministry of National Education], 2021).

However, on November 20, 2020, all school grade levels reverted back to emergency distance education (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [Turkish Ministry of National Education], 2021) due to a resurgence of virus cases. In addition to the asynchronous lessons offered via EBA TV, teachers started to also provide online synchronous lessons via the EBA portal. During synchronous distance education, while both the teachers and students can enter the system and undertake lessons at the same time, both must have an adequate working Internet connection and some suitable form of Internet-connected hardware such as a desktop, laptop, or tablet computer, or access to a smartphone.

The changes seen in the practices of distance education in Turkey since the 1950s has largely been influenced by the technological developments of the age. Initially, distance education was offered on a correspondence basis, whilst in 1996 the concept of computer-based distance education was being mentioned (Bozkurt, 2017). After the second round of elementary school closures in Turkey due to COVID-19, both synchronous and asynchronous learning models began to be applied together. During the pandemic, the transition to emergency distance education has had a significant impact on the lives of many students, as well as their teachers and also their parents.

When academic studies conducted during the pandemic period are examined, it can be seen that the focus has largely been on evaluating the effects of the pandemic on the parent-child relationship (e.g., Uzun et al., 2021), child maltreatment (e.g., Baron et al., 2020; Griffith, 2020; Lawson et al., 2020), and the mental health of children (e.g., Glynn et al., 2021). Studies on distance education during the pandemic have generally been carried out within the framework of the opinions of branch teachers or university students on distance education (e.g., Bayburtlu, 2020; Doghonadze et al., 2020; Yılmaz İnce et al., 2020). The pandemic has affected the educational lives of learners of all ages, but especially those facing a critical period in their educational life such as the first-grade of elementary school. Even under what would be considered normal educational conditions, orientation studies are conducted in order to adapt first-grade students to school life; with these new students starting earlier than the existing grades, and through adaptation programs being conducted. During the pandemic period, students had no time real time or opportunity to adapt to school life, meet their teachers, make peer friends, or to adapt to the required school study discipline. The children had to conduct an educational process that was alien to them in front of a screen with a group of people that they most probably did not know, to learn how to socialize through the screen, and to try to understand the rules and expectations of them as students.

Additionally, the teachers were also expected to efficiently manage their communications with their students (both ways), and also in terms of student-student peer communication, to ensure students followed the fundamental rules of lessons, and to establish communication with the new students’ parents, the support of whom the teachers

needed throughout this process more so than in normal times with face-to-face teaching. For this reason, the first-grade students and their teachers were seen as experiencing a greater level of problems in comparison to those at the other grades. It is thought that, while first-grade students may not possess many of the fundamental skills such as knowing how to write, students' implementation of directives, following the homework, and teachers' effort to impart all of these skills to their students via emergency distance education are believed to have been the cause of various deficiencies during the pandemic. As such, it is known that learning losses for the first grade during this period have continued into the next grade, and that the gap between peers appears to constantly increase (Akçınar, 2013; Gülay Ogelman & Erten Sarıkaya, 2013; Perry & Weinstein, 1998; Spencer et al., 2001; Stanovich, 2009). It was therefore considered essential to reveal the types of problems that first-grade elementary school teachers experience due to their importance in guiding the future efforts to address these issues, and to ensure that both teachers and students are better able to pass through this critical period considering the current conditions of the pandemic.

To this aim, the current study aimed to determine the difficulties of first-grade elementary school teachers during the pandemic period, and to seek answers to the following research questions:

- What difficulties have first-grade elementary school teachers experienced during the emergency distance education period of the pandemic?
- What difficulties have first-grade elementary school teachers experienced during the face-to-face education period of the pandemic?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research design

This study, which aims to reveal the experiences of elementary school first-grade teachers during the pandemic period, was designed as a phenomenological study in order to focus on how the individuals made sense of their experiences (Patton, 2014). The phenomenon discussed in the current study relates to the experiences of Turkish elementary school first-grade teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of the study centers on the participants' experiences of the identified phenomenon.

2.2. Study group

The study group of the research comprises first-grade teachers who worked in one of the metropolitan cities of Turkey's Black Sea Region during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years. Maximum diversity sampling, a known purposeful sampling method, was used to determine the study group in order to determine whether or not similarities or differences existed in terms of the elementary school first-grade teachers' experiences in the educational process during the pandemic, according to their different characteristics (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Attention was paid to participants with differences in terms of variables such as their professional seniority (as in number of years served), the type of school at which they worked, and the number of students they taught. In this way, through diversity, the experiences of participants with different characteristics regarding distance education were deemed to be best evaluated. As study groups in phenomenological research should ideally consist of between three and 15 participants, the current study was conducted with 15 elementary school first-grade teachers (Creswell, 2013). In the study,

code names (pseudonyms) were given to the participants so as to ensure the anonymity of the study group members.

Table 1. Participant teachers' demographic information

	Pseudonym	Gender	Professional seniority (years)	School type	Students (#)
1	Lale	Female	12	Elementary	24
2	Zehra	Female	8	Elementary	21
3	Hatice	Female	13	Elementary	28
4	Ülkü	Female	21	Elementary	38
5	Ayşegül	Female	19	Elementary	41
6	Mehmet	Male	7	Elementary	19
7	Ömer	Male	23	Elementary	36
8	Sevinç	Female	18	Elementary	29
9	Türkan	Female	16	Elementary	32
10	Turgay	Male	20	Elementary	33
11	Gökhan	Male	15	Elementary	29
12	Öznur	Female	11	Elementary	18
13	Demet	Female	10	Elementary	22
14	Ahmet	Male	18	Elementary	36
15	Sevim	Female	22	Elementary	34

When Table 1 is examined, it can be seen that 10 of the participants are female and five are male. The seniority of the participants varied between 7 and 23 years' service. All of the teachers worked in elementary schools, whilst the number of students they taught varied between 18 and 41.

2.3. Instruments

The interview technique, which is frequently used in phenomenological studies, was used to collect the data in the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The use of this technique was considered appropriate for the current study since it allowed the participant teachers to examine their pandemic experiences in some depth, which helped the researchers to better understand their perspective on the phenomena. A semi-structured interview form was prepared by the researchers as a data collection tool. In semi-structured interviews, researchers can pose additional questions in addition to those prepared in advance, with the aim being to elicit a sufficient breadth and depth of information so as to adequately detail the research subject (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Researchers may also change the ordering of the questions according to the flow of the interview (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The semi-structured interview form was employed in the current study since it provides flexibility to the researchers; has a high rate of obtaining answers through interaction with the participants on a one-to-one basis, and through posing different questions as and where necessary; and prevents the repetition of questions already answered according to the flow of the interview.

Whilst preparing the semi-structured interview form, a review of the published literature was conducted. From the literature review, pre-interviews were conducted with three elementary school first-grade teachers who were not part of the study group. On the basis of the information that came to the fore from both the literature review and the pre-interviews, a semi-structured interview form was prepared to include open-ended questions. The prepared form was then sent to two academicians and two classroom

teachers who are considered experts in the field of classroom education, and the recommended adjustments and changes were applied to the form in line with their feedback. Whilst the interview form consisted of 13 questions, it was determined that the total number of items ranged from between 18 and 27 when the semi-structured questions were included.

During the participants' interviews, they were each asked questions such as "Were there any learning losses noted during the emergency distance education process?," "What kind of tools did you use during the emergency distance education process?," "What resources did you use?," "Did any of your students experience problems with Internet access?," as well as "How did you ensure the required hygiene standards were adhered to in the classroom?," and "Did the students have any problems wearing the required facemasks in the classroom?" Additional questions were also asked in order to increase the depth of the answers given. Examples of these additional questions include, "In which subjects were the noted learning losses experienced?" and "What kind of measures did you take for the parents to be involved?" with the aim being to better understand the initial responses of the participants. The participant interviews lasted for between 67 and 92 minutes.

2.4. Procedure

The data collection process commenced during the 2020-2021 academic year. During the data collection, first, the researchers contacted the teachers by telephone and informed them about the purpose of the study. In addition, the researchers stated that, as participants, their personal information would not be disclosed and would remain confidential during and after the research study. An informed consent form was then sent to each of the participants. Arrangements were then made with the teachers who decided to participate in the study with regards to the place and time of their interview. The researchers conducted the interviews in person by visiting the teachers' schools, whilst paying due care and attention to both the required hygiene and social distancing protocols. During the interviews, with the knowledge and agreement of each participant, the interviews were audio recorded. Following each interview, one of the researchers transcribed the interview from the relevant audio recording, after which the researcher contacted the participant as to confirm whether the transcribed interview data included any form of misunderstanding, and whether or not they wanted any subjects to be added or removed.

2.5. Data analysis

The content analysis method was applied in the current study in order to determine the themes that could best define the phenomena, according to the teachers' experiences in delivering education during the pandemic period. Content analysis is one of the methods used in phenomenological studies in relating the experiences of users and in finding meaningful statements (Christensen et al., 2015). Yıldırım and Şimşek (2016) stated that the main objective of content analysis is to reach concepts and relationships that can adequately explain the collected data, and that the following four stages should be followed during the analysis; coding the data, finding themes, organizing codes and themes, and defining and interpreting the findings.

In the study, the audio recordings of the participants' interviews, that were captured with their approval, were first transcribed to written form. Following the transcription, three researchers then independently coded the data. During the coding, the "consensus-

dissensus” model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was employed. While coding the data, the responses given to a question were ordered in a list. While examining the responses to the items, researchers frequently reminded themselves of whether the responses being examined were considered of particular importance to the research. The data were repeatedly read in detail, with the aim being to recognize and understand the similarities. During the reading process, the parts thought to be of significance to the research were labeled using a code that identified that part. This process continued until all the data had been reviewed and the coding completed, and then the codes were gathered together in a combined list. The words that portrayed the meaningful portion of the data, and identifying the content of the data were chosen during the coding exercise. By the end of the coding, the first researcher had determined 21 codes, whilst the second researcher had determined 25 codes, and the third researcher had determined 24 codes. Comparable and divergent codes were determined, and either separated or amalgamated. In order to determine the reliability of the output of the three coders, the reliability formula developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was applied. The codes determined by the three coders were labeled as comparable or divergent, and the consensus percentage ($\text{Consensus}/(\text{Consensus}+\text{Dissensus})\times 100$) was then calculated.

Table 2. Coder consensus

Opinions	Coders I and II	Coders I and III	Coders II and III	Coders I, II, and III
Consensus	21	19	22	
Dissensus	2	4	5	
Consensus %	91.30%	82.60%	81.48%	85.00%
Mean consensus %				

Examining the agreement percentages, the consensus between Coder I and Coder II was found to be 91%, whilst between Coder I and Coder III it was 83%, and between Coder II and Coder III the consensus was found to be 81%. The overall consensus was established as being 85%. Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that a $\geq 80\%$ consensus between coders is considered to be a good level of consensus.

With the coder reliability of 85%, the divergent codes were reexamined and consensus was achieved for 22 of the codes. The codes obtained were examined under two main categories related back to the study questions.

2.6. Validity–reliability

Validity and reliability are two of the most significant areas of concerns that apply to every stage of a research study, from the beginning to the end, and require due diligence to be exercised (Merriam, 2015). To overcome these concerns in the current study, different practices were conducted so as to ensure the study’s validity and reliability through the consideration of ethical principles. However, Yıldırım and Şimşek (2016) stated that in qualitative research, using the concepts of credibility, transferability, consistency, and verifiability, instead of validity and reliability, is more appropriate to the nature of this type of research.

In the current study, the researchers attempted to achieve long-term interaction with each participant teacher so as to ensure credibility. First, the teachers were pre-interviewed via telephone, the purpose of the study was explained to them, and a mutually agreeable appointment made for a face-to-face meeting with those who accepted to participate in the study. During the teachers’ interviews, they were each informed once again about the

purpose of the study, and were asked whether or not there was any issues that they were deliberating in their minds. To conduct the interviews in a safe and relaxed environment, permission was obtained from the teachers to audio-record the meeting. Additionally, the participants were assured once again that their identity would remain confidential.

Once the interviews had been completed and subsequently transcribed, the researchers met with the participant teachers once again and discussed whether or not there was any issue that they wanted to add or remove from their interview transcription. From this, two of the participants requested various additions. Meeting again with the participants and making any necessary changes demonstrates that participant confirmation was obtained. During the research study, by working with teachers with different characteristics, the data sources were considered to be diverse, which helped to contribute to the credibility of the study. In addition, arrangements were made to court the opinion of experts in the field, both in the preparation of the pre-planned interview questions and in the subsequent analysis of the collected interview data.

In developing and reporting the study's findings, both direct quotations and maximum diversity sampling, one of the purposeful sampling methods, were used to ensure transferability. In qualitative research, it is necessary to develop a valid data collection tool, to properly collect the study's data, and to be consistent in the data analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Therefore, whether or not the themes determined during the analysis formed a meaningful whole within and among themselves was examined. In addition, the research results were discussed within the framework of the determined codes and themes. Finally, a field expert, other than one of the main researchers and who had previously carried out qualitative research, examined the interview form used in the research, the data obtained, and the codes and themes determined during the data analysis, and any recommended changes were applied in line with their feedback.

3. RESULTS

The findings obtained from the participant teachers' interviews were examined under two areas: problems experienced during the emergency distance education process, and problems experienced during the emergency face-to-face education process.

3.1. Difficulties experienced by first-grade elementary teachers during distance education

Problems experienced in the distance education process were explored under the codes of focusing, learning losses, homework, textbooks, curriculum, equipment problems, screen time, hardware deficiencies, Internet access, connectivity problems, absenteeism, communication problems, home conditions, expectations from the state, inadequate family support, and security problems.

Table 3. Problems experienced during emergency distance education

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Sample quotations</i>
<i>Distance Education</i>	<i>Focusing</i>	<i>There was a problem with online lessons. The students were so distracted that they could not adapt. Some had a computer in the living room, with the TV turned on, or they had siblings there or someone else. As they all continued on with their regular lives, it becomes impossible for the child to concentrate fully whilst everyone was talking and eating in the same room.</i>

Category	Code	Sample quotations
		<p>[Mehmet] <i>The mother, father, or whoever is there [with the child] constantly intervenes in the background; and we are unable to stop it. This causes the child to become very distracted. We gave warnings, but that did not seem to help either. [Türkan]</i></p>
	<i>Learning losses</i>	<p><i>While one group switched to reading and writing, the other was still unable to recognize the letters. In the classroom, we could deal with this situation by paying extra attention where needed and giving activities to the children who fell behind, but this gap gradually increased in distance education. Now, while one group will start from scratch in face-to-face training, the other will already be reading and writing. It will therefore be very difficult to have them meet at a common point in the future. It will become a sort of multi-graded classroom. [Zehra]</i></p> <p><i>We are grateful to those who attend the online lessons, whether they are few or many. There are those who never attended any of the lessons, such as where the child has no Internet, tablet, infrastructure, or are otherwise unable to attend. Now, think about what you will do with that student once the second semester starts. [Ülkü]</i></p>
	<i>Homework</i>	<p><i>Homework was not compulsory; but many things weren't compulsory anyway. The same was for lesson attendance, doing homework, turning on the webcam; however, homework is an essential part of the first-grade. We gave homework over WhatsApp groups instead. The children then sent their homework back to me, and I provided feedback using the same application. [Gökhan]</i></p> <p><i>I gave the homework either through the EBA or WhatsApp, and then gave the correct answers during the live lessons, and continued from there. Otherwise, it would not be possible to keep up with the timetable. [Mehmet]</i></p> <p><i>I gave homework through EBA. I left it to the family to check the homework as there was no channel that I could use to check on them regularly. [Lale]</i></p>
	<i>Textbooks</i>	<p><i>Textbooks were not suitable for emergency distance education. At least, they should have been adapted for use via EBA on the Internet and adapted so that we could use them interactively. There was no such application, even though there are many good applications on various online education sites. We experienced numerous difficulties, especially as first-grade teachers. We literally tried to teach writing by having students try to write the</i></p>

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Sample quotations</i>
		<i>text between two lines using the Paint application, you know. How could there be such nonsense? [Demet]</i>
	<i>Curriculum</i>	<i>The curriculum load continued the same. We were asked to apply the existing 5-day curriculum to the students in just 2 days. How is it possible to teach a child a new letter in just 2 days? This was ridiculous. Many topics could have been taken out, but we just had to use our own initiative. We tried to continue to conduct distance education in the same manner as that of face-to-face classroom education. [Ömer]</i>
	<i>Equipment problems</i>	<i>We could not find any equipment suitable for distance education. Like in the National Forces, and the National Struggle period everybody was sending each other whatever they found because there was no infrastructure. A website could have been created. Now there is EBA, but EBA is similar to a forum. We send the videos and lectures there. There was nothing systematic. A website where we could access tools could have been created. I think they [the state] were very much unprepared. They could have made it possible for us to access these tools by making arrangements with online education websites. [Ülkü] You are teaching, but there is nothing you can project onto the screen, as we would with a whiteboard. It was terrible; so we bought whiteboards for our houses. People even used their cabinets as mock whiteboards. In first-grade, we use a lot of materials in the classroom; but of course we could not use these materials during the emergency distance education period, and so it was a difficult process. [Türkan]</i>
	<i>Screen time</i>	<i>During the emergency distance education period, the children were using their computers or tablets for long periods of time, e.g., 6 hours. This situation was highly unsuitable for the children's development; these kids are just first-graders. Data on this matter, whilst published, were not even considered. We were not conducting actual face-to-face education, but sort of like face-to-face education, with the child sat there in front of the screen for 6 hours. It was both unhealthy for them and very difficult to maintain the child's attention to the screen for such a long time. [Turgay]</i>
	<i>Hardware deficiencies</i>	<i>Sometimes, when the lessons of siblings overlap, there are two children at home, but there is often only one tablet computer. The parent telephones and says if you are not going to switch to [learning] a new letter, my other child will use the device for their lesson instead. [Ahmet] There are 28 people [students], but 5-6 of them cannot</i>

Category	Code	Sample quotations
		<p>enter the lesson because they do not have a computer or tablet. In face-to-face education, 5-6 students also may fall behind the class anyway. Some students have trouble transitioning to reading and writing, and sometimes, they cannot even make the transition. That is why this situation actually seems quite normal to me. [Hatice]</p>
	Internet access	<p>I have a student who cannot access the Internet because of the available infrastructure. They connect using mobile data via the father's smartphone. As the father comes home only in the evening, either the child cannot attend the class or they go to a neighbor or something and enter the class. How will these children learn to adequately read and write? How will they return to school next year? Half of them will be like second-grade students, whilst the other half will be first-graders still. [Ahmet]</p> <p>The state [Republic of Turkey] granted 8 GB of free Internet access to each student, but the students cannot use it because the live lesson is hosted on Zoom. When you enter EBA, it directs you to Zoom for the live lesson. At that point, the parents receive a warning that states, 'You cannot use your 8 GB Internet access quota for this. Do you wish to continue?.' If they approve, which they have to if they want their child to watch the lesson, they have to use their own Internet. Most parents are unaware of this. They think the state provides it, but this is not the case. The Internet the state provides is only for watching or downloading on EBA, and it is therefore very limiting in its effect. [Gökhan]</p> <p>Two tablets came from benefactors. I told the families many times, I would give the tablets to them if they got the Internet access, if not, I would give the tablets to another family. We gave the tablets to one family, but they still haven't gotten Internet access for months. At least someone else could have benefited from the tablets; but they prevented that too. [Öznur]</p>
	Connectivity problems	<p>While teaching, I ask a student a question, and the Internet just disconnects us. So, I'm unsure whether or not the student knows the answer to the question and just disconnected, or whether it was a connection failure. This is a very common problem. In addition, if we do the lesson on Zoom, it is necessary to keep track of those who enter and exit. This is another concentration issue. [Ayşegül]</p>
	Absenteeism	<p>There is no obligation to attend; so the students are not obliged to turn on their microphone or camera. I called out many times to a student to ask a question, and when they could not answer, they wrote to me as a private</p>

Category	Code	Sample quotations
		<p><i>message. It turns out that their parent was in the hospital, and they [the parent] entered the lesson in order that the student did not appear absent. Therefore, we do not actually know if a student really attends [the lesson], or even if they are actually listening. [Sevim]</i></p> <p><i>Whilst there is no obligation to attend classes, I think it should have been mandatory to attend at least for the first grade. It is very difficult for children to learn how to read and write on their own. In other grades, the family more or less does something to help, but here everything is mixed up. They must be able to interact with us. [Mehmet]</i></p>
	Communication problems	<p><i>Communication with students' parents has become very difficult. They are constantly writing private messages to us, constantly asking for something, day or night. I noticed that the parents can be very irresponsible. We were always doing follow-ups when teaching face-to-face at the school, hence things used to go quite smoothly. When it came to the parents attempting to take control, things got out of hand. They could neither follow the homework nor get it [the homework] done. [Öznur]</i></p> <p><i>When taking care of the education of their child was added to the families' financial difficulties and livelihood concerns, it became difficult to contact either the student or their parents. This is because when there are individuals dealing with financial difficulties or livelihood concerns in real terms, unfortunately, the educational life of their child is no longer their primary concern. They place themselves last according to the hierarchy of needs. Especially with the pandemic, the needs of children have receded further into the background as their parents' livelihood problems have increased. [Demet]</i></p> <p><i>We just have half an hour. Even communicating with the student sometimes takes 2 minutes. Is the sound working? Is the microphone on? They talk at the same time, sometimes you call out to them, but then they are not there. The sound and the connection get lost somehow. [Sevinç]</i></p>
	Home Conditions	<p><i>During the live lesson, you really get to know all about the conversations that take place in the house. Let's say the child does not have their own room, or the computer is situated in the living room and the microphone remains on. The family does not pay any attention to that, and they continue to say whatever comes to mind. This often has no boundaries, with insults, gossip, and derogatory terms flowing freely. There is no respect. One day, in a live</i></p>

Category	Code	Sample quotations
		<p><i>class, a student's mother beat up one of the other children behind my student. I saw it too, she was unaware that she was being watched of course. [Ahmet]</i></p>
	<p><i>Expectations from the state</i></p>	<p><i>The state obliged us to conduct distance education but did not provide any infrastructure for it. For example, we all use our own laptops or the Internet that we pay for. I do not think I should have to use my private Internet to conduct my work for the state. After all, I may not even have Internet connection at my house or even own a laptop. They [the state] requested us to provide a service but without providing these opportunities. I therefore have to spend at least 750 MB per day just to conduct my online lessons. At the very least the state should provide the Internet connectivity costs. [Ayşegül]</i></p> <p><i>They sent us a message to turn on the camera during the lesson so that the children could see us, but we did not turn it on [the camera]. That is my private property; the state cannot make me do that. The state did not provide me with any space or material for distance education. Therefore, we did not turn on the camera either. It is difficult to know who is sitting in front of the camera (from the students' perspective). Why should I turn it on? Do I have to reserve a room of my house for you? When could you force me to do so? If you can arrange a place for me for education with the state capabilities, then I will turn on the camera. [Mehmet]</i></p>
	<p><i>Inadequate family support</i></p>	<p><i>Parents' problems regarding the education status of students receiving distance education varied, depending on various reasons. Matters such as the income level of the parents, the social environment they live in, their education level, the level of their technological literacy, their perspective on education, and the family status are all determinants. These issues can be evaluated individually, or in conjunction with each other. Another responsibility of the parents is meeting the educational needs of their children. Considering the social environment in which the parents live, unfortunately, you [as teachers] may have to distance yourself from the student when the necessary materials for distance education are not provided by the parents. They can see it as not worth mentioning, view any investment in education to be in vain, and may feel it is all insignificant even though they are in a good financial situation and could readily meet those needs. [Turgay]</i></p> <p><i>For example, the attitude of parent groups, with some who have limited financial means but are ready to do</i></p>

Category	Code	Sample quotations
		<p><i>whatever is necessary for the education of their children, whilst other groups who are also not in a good financial situation and do not make education a current issue, meet at the same point in terms of education during the pandemic. This is because without sufficient means, the parents may not be able to buy the equipment they need, no matter how much they may wish to help their children out. The aid provided is not always enough. So, which one should we help? [Zehra]</i></p> <p><i>Parental support is very important in the first-grade. We explain what to do every day and try to keep track of it, but it is not as it is in face-to-face schooling. Many parents have more than one child and are unsure which one to keep track of. Honestly, that is often why I do not get the level of parental support that I would like to see. [Ülkü]</i></p>
	Security problems	<p><i>One of our topics was technological literacy. Parents who do not have the necessary infrastructure are forced to leave their children alone in this education process. There are some families that do not even know when their child has a lesson to attend, what lessons they have, and for how many hours they will need to be connected to receive their distance education. In short, there are families who are unaware of the dangers of the Internet environment that distance education opens up for their children, and they may think that they do not need to do anything more than provide their children with the necessary technological device and Internet connectivity. However, this situation causes students to drift towards using the Internet's more harmful environment in an uncontrolled manner. This has become a social problem for families with low-level technological literacy, families with low levels of education, and for the children of parents with high education levels that may simply leave their child alone with distance education tools because of various different reasons. Naive terms like 'family protection packages' are up for debate as to how protective they really are. [Mehmet]</i></p> <p><i>When teaching on Zoom, we were concerned about security. Especially in the higher grades, there were those who shared the link given with others, who performed inappropriate actions in the class whilst attending, etc. Frankly, we were worried if an unknown person would be able to enter the lesson under the name of a student; that is, having a problem was thought of as fait accompli. There were meetings held to discuss the safety issues</i></p>

Category	Code	Sample quotations
		<i>related to using Zoom, but nothing happened, we continued the same way. [Lale]</i>

3.2. Difficulties experienced by first-grade elementary teachers during face-to-face education

The problems experienced in the face-to-face training process were examined under the codes of facemasks, social distancing, hygiene, adaptation problems, socialization, and parents.

Table 4. Problems experienced during face-to-face education

Category	Code	Sample quotations
Face-to-face education	Facemasks	<i>Students had difficulties in using facemasks because of their young age. A student of mine told me that they changed their facemask by sitting on the ground and spreading out the facemask on the floor. They had serious difficulties in wearing facemasks, especially during break times. I think they felt suffocated because they would want to run around and play; that’s why they didn’t want to wear a facemask. [Demet]</i>
	Social distancing	<i>They had difficulty in following the social distancing rules, both whilst playing games and during their in-class activities. In addition, we could not play enough games, both because of social distancing rules and the limited length of time spent at school. The children did not get to realize the fun side of school; hence, it was a more boring education-based process than before. [Öznur]</i>
	Hygiene	<i>Every classroom had hand sanitizer available, but they [the students] did not use it for its intended purpose; instead they used it to play games, squeezing it at each other in ‘disinfectant wars.’ [Ömer] We could not stop them from sharing stuff. We said it was strictly forbidden, but the children did not stop sharing pencils, erasers, and crayons. It was a constant scene of give and take. [Zehra]</i>
	Adaptation Problems	<i>Since they were always at home during online education, they sat down, stood up, and hung out as they wished. There were those asking for fruit juice and biscuits from their mother during lessons. There were parents talking and interfering in the background. It was a total ruckus. Of course, they then wanted to continue like that in the face-to-face classroom as well. [Gökhan] Some students had trouble adjusting because they did not come to school every day. Their families said they did not want to come to school and so they did not get used to it. They mentioned not being able to play games comfortably and that they did not want to wear a facemask. [Hatice]</i>

<i>Socialization</i>	<p><i>They wanted to sit and work together, especially in classes such as Visual Arts. There were always asking questions like ‘Should we sit together?’ [Demet]</i></p> <p><i>Since the class was divided into two, during face-to-face classes, one half the class had only ever seen the other half online, so the children did not know each other. Friendship is very important when starting out at school, but the children were still unaware of each other. They saw each other only on screen, but could not experience the feeling of the true school environment. [Ahmet]</i></p>
<i>Parents</i>	<p><i>The parents were always coming into the school, and the children were under their control during the class breaks. They [the students] did not really understand that they were at school. When we switched over to face-to-face education, they felt like a fish out of water. We wanted to distance the parents, but we could not intervene because their minds were hung up on the school. [Sevim]</i></p> <p><i>The parents wanted them [the children] to go to school because they were first-graders, and they were very concerned about whether they would learn the foundational skills such as reading and writing. But, when it came to face-to-face education, they were consumed by a fear of COVID and wanted to monitor their children constantly. We tried to comfort them as much as possible, but I do not know how well it worked. [Zehra]</i></p>

4. DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown its effects in many fields. Various measures have been taken in order to reduce the effects of the pandemic, with one such measure being the closure of schools. In Turkey, schools were closed for face-to-face education, with emergency distance education started soon after for all grades. As the effective period of the pandemic became more prolonged, new measures were developed and the online classes were used in conjunction with asynchronous distance education. In order to allow preschool children, who had only recently started their schooling and also first-grade students to adapt to the school environment, face-to-face education was partially resumed within specific rules and on specific days of the week. Given that students starting preschool education and first-grade education face a significant and important transition from home life to school life, it was considered that face-to-face education plays a vital role in their adaptation to school life and in learning about the school culture. However, due to increases seen in case numbers of COVID-19, the face-to-face preschool and elementary school education was again completely switched back to emergency distance education, with virtual classes started to be used for conducting educational activities. During this process, both teachers and students experienced a mix of face-to-face and distance-based education. Based on this period, the current study aimed to determine the difficulties of first-grade elementary school teachers during the pandemic.

At the end of research, it was determined that the various stakeholders of education in Turkey were caught unprepared for the impact of such a pandemic and that they had no viable prior distance education experience. Since most elementary school teachers had not used any form of distance education for conducting their daily educational activities, it was considered that this challenging situation was somewhat inevitable. The fact that the stakeholders in Turkey were both unprepared for and inexperienced in applying distance learning brought about considerable problems. The current study revealed many findings regarding this issue.

Analyzed under two categories, the issues experienced were divided into those experienced during emergency distance education and those experienced during the limited face-to-face education offered during the pandemic. Problems experienced during the emergency distance education process were explored under categories of focusing, learning losses, homework, textbooks, curriculum, equipment problems, screen time, hardware deficiencies, Internet access, connectivity problems, absenteeism, communication problems, home conditions, expectations from the state, inadequate family support, and security problems. When the findings regarding each of these were examined, it could be seen that the students experienced problems in focusing on their lessons during the emergency distance education process. It was determined that students without a separate room and with the computer located in the common living area of the house having had the most difficulty in focusing on their lessons. Considering the first-grade students' developmental characteristics, it is believed that they likely experienced difficulties in their attention focus. In a study conducted by Kaymak Özmen and Demir (2012), elementary school-age children were found to focus their attention best in silent environments and at the beginning of a lesson, whilst the factors that distracted them the most were voices and the presence of other individuals. Hence, it may be said that in distance education, an appropriate study environment is of significant importance for efficient educational activities to be conducted. Alper (2020) stated that children, particularly the younger ones attending the early years of their schooling, experience problems focusing on the distance education process. Similarly, in a study conducted with first-grade elementary school teachers, Karabudak (2020) determined that children can become bored very quickly and experience problems of being easily distracted.

The growing differential between students' academic achievement was expressed as one of the most significant problems faced during the emergency distance education process. The gap became more pronounced and difficult to address during the learning process of reading and writing, and particularly for first-grade students. It was revealed that whilst one part of the class was moving on to reading and writing, the others had not learned the letters. This situation is believed to result in the formation of different level groups within a single class. Karabudak (2020) emphasized that, when compared to face-to-face education, children gain literacy skills much later during distance education and that their reading and writing qualities are resultantly much lower.

Erol and Erol (2020) conducted a study with the parents of students, and concluded that the academic achievements of children were negatively affected during the emergency distance education process. It is thought that this gap will likely increase because course attendance is not compulsory and some students do not possess the required technological equipment or Internet connectivity to attend online lessons. In order for distance education to function properly, both students and teachers must have suitable equipment with a

regular Internet connection. Students lacking these fundamentals or subjected to infrastructural problems are effectively prevented from attending their school lessons, completing their homework assignments, and their continuity of education generally hindered.

In some houses, even where the required equipment was available, students chose whether or not to attend classes according to the perceived importance of each lesson due to limited resources (i.e., Internet connected devices) shared with others living in the same household. Similarly, Başaran et al. (2020) conducted a study with teachers, students, and parents and determined that some children could not attend their distance education lessons because of the high number of siblings studying in the same house, as well as infrastructural problems. It may be said, therefore, that the problems experienced by children due to infrastructural limitations are not specific to Turkey. Studies conducted in Indonesia, Italy, and also in India have clearly shown that many children throughout the world have been negatively impacted by infrastructural and equipment deficiencies (Giovannella et al., 2020; Khanna & Kareem, 2021; Putri et al., 2020). Ergün and Arık (2020) stated that this situation can result in a digital divide among students of the same class, and which causes inequalities among children to intensify even more. Another problem is that the tools and materials are not always adapted to be suitable for application in the distance education environment. In the current study, the teachers stated that both the textbooks and the activities contained in them were unsuitable for use in distance education. Starting up distance education prior to having full command of writing would inevitably result in such problems, hence children are thought to need face-to-face support and guidance whilst learning how to write. Moreover, since the emergency distance education process in Turkey started from a position of being considerably ill-prepared, and with materials more suited to face-to-face education, the participating teachers experienced significant difficulties in overcoming this problem. Similarly, in a study examining the distance education experiences of elementary school teachers, Khanna and Kareem (2021) stated that teachers experienced problems in finding appropriate resources for online education. It is thought that they experienced such problems due to the time it takes for teachers to adapt to the concept of distance education, as well as known technological deficiencies. In their study with teachers working in different school types, Karakaya et al. (2021) similarly reported that teachers experienced problems due to technological deficiencies. Also, Putri et al. (2020) stated that teachers in Indonesia experienced problems due to both infrastructural deficiencies and deficiencies in their own technical skill.

The same as students, teachers in Turkey also participated in lessons from home, and they sometimes experienced problems similar to those of their students. During the emergency distance education period, teachers taught lessons from their homes and various studies found that the environment of the teachers' houses was not suited to conducting education, and that the teachers experienced a number of problems for this reason (Giovannella et al., 2020; Putri et al., 2020). In the current study, the participating teachers stated that they procured the Internet connection and equipment such as whiteboards on their own, which added a financial burden on the teachers.

It was seen that the teachers expected at least Internet access to be provided to them by the state in order that they could deliver distance education lessons from their homes. Koyuncu and Düşkün (2020) stated that during the pandemic, teachers were affected by their students' state of accessing the digital content and also by their home circumstances,

as well as their own living conditions as teachers, and their ability to competently use the required digital tools. Another issue that caused concern in terms of delivering distance education was security. The fact that any individuals with access to the correct password or link could enter live lessons, and with parents not being able to adequately follow what their children are doing on the computer, may result in young students communicating with people they shouldn't on the Internet. In addition, children had to spend a great deal of time in front of the computer, tablet, smartphone, or television during the emergency distance education process during the pandemic. Bayburtlu (2020) and also Karakaya et al. (2021) stated that this situation caused increased levels of screen addiction in children. Similarly, Erol and Erol (2020) stated that the time children spent using digital screen-based tools increased, and therefore, increased conflicts were experienced between parents and their children from time to time.

It is considered that the support and role of parents in distance education is of critical importance during the time when their children first learn to write. Fiş Erümit (2021) stated that the support of family members for young children is significantly required in managing the distance education process. However, in the current study, it was determined that the level of parental support was found to be inadequate. In a study conducted by Karabudak (2020), the inattention of students' parents was similarly emphasized; however, Kirsch et al. (2021) determined that parents tended to support their children during distance education. Of course, not all parents know how to support their children. Moreover, the shutting down of many places of business or the transition to working from home caused many difficulties in the lives of family members. Parents, who are mostly kept busy doing whatever is necessary to manage their domestic life and business life, might face certain difficulties in following the schooling of their children.

In Turkish schools, face-to-face education was able to be partially carried out at certain points in the pandemic by paying attention to the physical (social) distance between children, the compulsory use of facemasks, and hygiene conditions such as the regular application of hand sanitizer. At the completion of the study, it was determined that students experienced certain difficulties in adapting to wearing facemasks, and also with social distancing and hygiene requirements during their face-to-face education. Considering the developmental characteristics of children, it seems normal for them to want to play with their friends and natural for them to violate social distancing rules during their game playing. Given the children's age group, it is considered normal for children to experience such challenges. In a study conducted by Kirsch et al. (2021), it was emphasized that children missed both their school and their friends during the emergency distance education period of the pandemic. Similarly, in the study of Fiş Erümit (2021), it was determined that students missed the interpersonal communication of face-to-face education. Based on these findings, it is considered natural for young students especially to want to socialize and play games during face-to-face education.

The current study revealed that the students wanted to be together whilst game playing and when undertaking class activities, and continued to share objects even when instructed and reminded not to do so. Their teachers became worried because this situation increased the risk of the virus spreading. In addition, students already accustomed to online education wanted to move around as comfortably at school as they did in the home environment. Therefore, the teachers stated experiencing certain problems with classroom discipline.

5. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to determine the difficulties faced by first-grade elementary school teachers in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown, the teachers experienced various problems in both delivering face-to-face and emergency distance education. First, some students exhibited learning losses due to difficulties in attending lessons, and that this was due to a lack of Internet access and/or the required technical equipment, as well as inadequate familial support. The teachers considered that the lack of compulsory attendance also played its role in the realization of learning losses.

The teachers experienced difficulties in preparing or finding appropriate material suited to distance education, since the decision to initiate emergency distance education was imposed suddenly and with many teachers having had no such prior relevant experience. Moreover, the teachers believed that the available course textbooks were not suited to distance education. Another problem experienced was that the students were unable to focus on their lessons due to their home environment not being at all suitable for online lessons. Additionally, the teachers raised concerns regarding students spending long periods of time sat in front of a screen during the emergency distance education period. The teachers also felt uncomfortable in that the curriculum, which is the origin of this problem, was implemented online just as it was during normal (pre-pandemic) face-to-face education. According to the teachers' opinions, the curriculum should have been slightly simplified to be more in harmony with the application of distance-based online education.

Overall, the study found that the majority of problems that the teachers experienced during the delivery of face-to-face education during the pandemic period arose from the students' inability to adapt to the use of facemasks, as well as rules for social distancing and personal hygiene (e.g., use of hand sanitizer). Moreover, it was observed that students starting face-to-face education following the initial emergency distance education period experienced certain difficulties in adapting to the rules of the classroom. Another problem experienced during the face-to-face education period of the pandemic was that the students' parents did not want their children to even be in school due to concerns about COVID-19, and preferred not to leave their children alone in order to maintain parental control over them, even whilst at school. The teachers struggled with this situation, and believed as a result that they could not achieve the desired academic results that both they and the parents wanted.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In the current study, the difficulties of first-grade teachers and students in Turkey were examined from the teachers' perspective. Due to the pandemic, which was a primary driver for the study, it was difficult to conduct face-to-face research with traditionally large samples, and which is therefore considered one of the main limitations of the current study. The interviews of the study could only be conducted with a very limited group of teachers; hence, working with larger sample groups following the pandemic on studies regarding problems encountered during the emergency distance education period may reveal more in-depth and far-reaching results.

In the literature, despite the adaptation to school life having been examined at various grades, numerous studies have previously examined the orientation of first-grade students. However, due to the pandemic, the adaptation of students at any grade to school life has become a subject worthy of significant further investigation. For this reason, the

kinds of problems that students at different grades may have experienced during face-to-face education during the pandemic period should be examined, and appropriate changes to the curricula developed in order to address some of these problems. Especially based on the results of the current study, in order to prevent furthering the issues of learning losses, it is important for students to be able to adapt to the school environment as soon as possible. One of the important findings revealed in the current study was that, although we may live in a digital era, the involvement of parents and even teachers in the digitalization process has been somewhat limited. Based on the ideal of preparedness for such pandemics in the future, and in order to integrate digitalization into educational environments in a more useful manner, preparing to face such a negative situation in the future requires a clear need for teachers to be appropriately qualified in the effective usage of web 2.0 tools. Therefore, for this reason, teachers should be supported in the drive to gain such skills and to possess adequate working knowledge on these subjects through regular in-service training and seminars.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions The authors contributed equally to the current research with both data collection and data analysis. All authors have read and approved the published final version of the article.

Conflicts of Interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee, and also with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its subsequent amendments or comparable ethical standards. In addition, decision number 2021/694 was obtained from the Social and Humanities Ethics Committee of Ondokuz Mayıs University, Turkey, to conduct the current study.

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