Chapter 20
Anecdotes From Turkish Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Emergency remote teaching, on the one hand, constitutes the ground for equality of opportunity for students; but on the other hand, it can result in inequality becoming even more pronounced for disadvantaged groups. This chapter aims to present anecdotal evidence of inequalities from the perspectives of students, educators, parents, support personnel, and administrators during pandemic in Turkey. The study is based on the embedded single-case design and was applied with a total of 250 participants. According to the findings, lack of hardware, and/or issues of an infrastructural nature were some of the most cited forms of inequality. The stakeholders also noted problems having been experienced during live sessions, unclear measurement and evaluation grading systems, and educational materials applied to students with disabilities as forms of inequality. For the future of the next generation, there is a requirement for conscious state policies to be developed and implemented during the upcoming period as countries attempt to deal with the ongoing pandemic crisis.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 appeared suddenly and rapidly swept across the globe from the end of 2019 through the first few months of 2020. At that point, the term "distance education" became used on a daily basis, whereas previously it may have only been a term known with regards to the "distance" concept. Field experts

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reacted instantly to the unfolding crisis and began to refer to this new form of education, which was far removed from the realities of actual formalized "distance education" as "emergency remote teaching," with many different groups such as students, teachers, and administrators having started to use "Zoom," "MS Teams," and "Perculus Plus[1]," for the delivery of live lessons, as well as other similar applications, without any real fundamental understanding of what it really was or how to use it effectively or efficiently.

While the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic forced many countries into some form of societal lockdown, some opted to await the development of social viral immunity with a less restrictive approach. The effective closure of most countries towards the end of March 2020 necessitated urgent sectoral solutions, with most forced to overturn operating policies that were previously considered near impossible to accept in principle, let alone adopt. The education sector was inevitably forced towards the necessity of choosing digitalization as a means of operation which, according to one leading international source, coupled with a lack of Internet access for all, forced 1.5 billion children into being de facto excluded from education, with 180 countries having enforced school closures on a national level (World Food Programme, Food and Agriculture, Organization of the United Nations, & United Nations Children's Fund, 2020). However, due to the profound differences in access to online education, the United Nations Development Program (2020) estimated that 86% of primary school children were excluded from education in low income countries. "March 2020 will forever be known in the education community as the month when schools shut their doors almost all over the world. These global school closures will be remembered as a historically unprecedented month," according to Audrey Azoulay, Executive Director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Winthrop, 2020).

As a result of the pandemic, some 50 million school-aged children attending school in the United States alone were suddenly unable to attend school (DeMatthews et al., 2020). In British Columbia, a geographically and socially diverse province in the west of Canada, 44,000 teachers and almost 600,000 students were said to have been affected during the pandemic (Hyslop, 2020). Some countries, such as Japan, closed down schools without any immediate alternative available; whereas, neighboring China immediately swapped over to online learning as an alternative to classroom-based education (Rich et al., 2020). Zhang et al. (2020) described an emergency policy initiative called "Suspend Classes without Stopping Learning" that was launched by the Chinese Ministry of Education in their mission to transform teaching interventions into a largescale online teaching solution when schools were abruptly closed to face-to-face education. Belize, a small country situated between Mexico and Guatemala which realizes the majority of its income from tourism, was severely impacted in economic terms by the sudden onset of the global pandemic; and as a result, the services offered to teachers and students were severely restricted (Kirshner, 2020).

Globally, Internet access was determined as being 50% in schools considered socioeconomically disadvantaged, while this rate increased to over 90% in more advantaged schools (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). In the United States, there appeared to be a significant discrepancy across the various American societies (Li & Lalani, 2020); however, China laid claim to bringing all of its students on to a digital learning environment, setting a clear global lead (Zhang et al., 2020). Vegas (2020) found that only 36% of residents in lower-middle-income countries had access to the Internet, whilst Principi and Esposito (2020) stated that in some regions of Italy, 41% of households did not have a tablet or personal computer, and that only 14.3% of families with at least one child were guaranteed access to distance learning. In Indonesia, only 34% of students were said to be in a similar position (Li & Lalani, 2020), and in the United Kingdom, Thomas (2020) reported that whilst teachers had reliable Internet, it was sometimes inaccessible which effectively excluded certain students. Except for a study undertaken in Oulu (Finland)