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Social Work Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned for Programming and Practice

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Social Work Education during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned for Programming and Practice

Abstract

Background: In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote learning was rapidly implemented across schools of social work. This study examines the student perspective of online learning during the pandemic including the challenges faced from the unanticipated switch to remote learning and any benefits gleaned from remote learning.

Method: We conducted an online survey of social work students using Qualtrics. Surveys were delivered electronically to schools of social work in Turkey using convenience sampling. Qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis and quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS.

Results: The majority of the participants in our study (76.5 %) ranked their online education experience as fair (3 out of 5), reporting the most benefits of remote learning related to the academic domain and the greatest challenges related to the domain. Bi-variate analyses showed those over age 22 reported more experience of stress and anxiety ($p=0.20$), and those younger than 22 years have greater difficulty with staying on a screen for extended periods ($p=0.40$). A lack of digital learning materials ($p=0.28$) and stable internet connection ($p=0.49$), were also noted as key challenges.

Conclusion: The need for flexibility in teaching practices and course requirements and increased attention to mental health are important for ensuring an effective online learning experience. Future contingency plans should account for the need for interactive technology in online social work classrooms that facilitate the relationships, engagement and sense of belonging that are such a critical component of social education.

Keywords

social work, online education, pandemic, Covid-19

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Background

To date, Turkey has recorded a total of 7.44 million cases of COVID-19, and more than 66,000 deaths, making it the 6th highest country in the world in cases of the virus (WHO, 2021). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health implemented mitigation policies well in advance of the first confirmed case in the country. An operation center was established on January 6, 2020, a Science Committee was established on January 10, 2020, and government initiated public health interventions followed immediately thereafter. On January 14, 2020, the Ministry of Health released the “COVID-19 Disease Guideline”, which was been updated as the pandemic progressed (Ozkara et al, 2020).

As part of the strict mitigation efforts, all face-to-face education across educational institutions were ceased and moved to a distance and digital learning format (Ali et al., 2021; Mahmut, 2020; Ministry of Health Republic of Turkey, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, there was a lack of consensus in the field of social work around the use of online education. Although existing research demonstrates students’ educational outcomes and satisfaction with online and face-to-face courses are relatively comparable, some social work educators hold serious concerns that effective communication skills (i.e., appropriate use of non-verbal behavior) and interpersonal relationships cannot be fully developed in an online learning environment (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). Research has found faculty are particularly concerned with and hesitant about the effectiveness of online education in relation to the development of clinical practice skills and competencies (Levin, Fulginiti, & Moore, 2018; Moore, 2005). In particular, faculty report concerns that the teaching of ‘use of self’ and relationship development cannot be successfully achieved if student and faculty are not present together in person for this to be modeled (Levin, Fulginiti, & Moore, 2018). Research further indicates faculty hold significant doubt about the appropriateness of online education for teaching face-to-face interventions (Levin, Fulginiti, & Moore, 2018). Lastly, faculty workload and compensation, and the lack of interest in or ability to readily use technology have also been reported by faculty as concerns with online social work education (East et al., 2014). These faculty perceptions of online education are particularly important to understand as some research has found the success and failure of online-based education is largely the result of faculty acceptance (Stewart, Bachman, & Johnson, 2010; Wingo, Ivancova & Moss, 2017).

The rapid switch to remote learning at the onset of the pandemic exacerbated these existing concerns as many social work students experienced an online classroom for the first time with little to no preparation. This created a heavy burden for students who were no longer able to visit campus to use study facilities (i.e., libraries) and were confronted with the considerable loss of their usual peer networks (both social and study groups) and their daily routines. Further, students who began conducting educational activities at home had to struggle to find a balance between studying and family/home related responsibilities, particularly those who had to deal with new care-giving roles, such as home-schooling children or caring for sick family members. This disproportionately impacted female students, who more often are in the caregiver role than their male counterparts. Further inequities were also created with some students having inconsistent or limited access to Wi-Fi and not having a quiet, private space to conduct live class sessions or study in their home.

Additionally troubling is that students have been found to be particularly vulnerable to mental health issues during past global public health crises (i.e., SARS) similar to the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has demonstrated low life satisfaction, high perceived stress, symptoms of generalized anxiety, depression, suicide ideation and attempts, and PTSD among university students related to lockdown periods, with females reporting greater distress than males (Aslan et al., 2020; Cam et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020).

Given the importance of relationships and communication in social work education and the propensity of students to experience mental health challenges during periods of complex emergencies, it is reasonable to expect that the added stress of the unanticipated, involuntary uptake of online education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic would result in significant challenges for social work students. It could also be expected that these challenges would disproportionately impact female students who experienced more risk from sheltering in place due to added responsibilities and less availability for self-care and personal tasks. For example, research indicates rates of domestic violence increased significantly during the pandemic, often the result of “situational couple violence” in which conflicts that typically did not lead to physical violence since escalated due to the added stress of the pandemic and unrelenting proximity (University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2020). Additionally, in traditional families, females largely carry the responsibility of caring for the home and children (Popescu et al., 2023). Consequently, in families that experienced added caregiving responsibilities of the constant presence of children in the home and homeschooling due to school closures; the added presence of older parents in the household; and remote work and school, females were required to carry this additional burden more so than men (Popescu et al., 2023).

However, it remains unclear how the COVID -19 pandemic has impacted social work students, personally and academically. It is also unclear what unanticipated benefits may have been experienced from the online learning experience that could contribute to a positive remote learning experience and overall well-being. These are particularly relevant questions for the Turkish context given several key factors including: 1) the country has experienced extremely high rates of coronavirus; 2) cultural values regarding mental health are highly stigmatizing; 3) suicide is the 9th leading cause of death in the country, and suicide rates having tripled since the 1980s and continue to increase (Yilmaz & Riecher-Rössler, 2021); and 4) women are in especially vulnerable positions as gender norms place them at a lower status than men and protections for women are largely lacking (Tekkas et al, 2020).

This study aims to address this significant gap in knowledge and to examine the student perspective of online learning during the pandemic including their personal (social and psychological) and academic experiences related to: 1) the challenges they faced resulting from the unanticipated switch to remote synchronous learning; and 2) the potential benefits gleaned from remote learning including successful tools and methods used to provide instructional continuity and to create an effective learning environment. It is essential to understand both the challenges and best practices related to online social work education during times of global health crises to inform social work education moving forward and better prepare educators to support students to an optimal learning experience.

Methods

Sample

To collect the data during the time of pandemic social distancing restrictions, we conducted an online survey of social work students using Qualtrics as the survey platform. Surveys were delivered electronically to schools of social work in Turkey. The study used a convenience sampling to recruit study participants. All students were registered in the social work program at the universities the surveys were sent. Surveys were administered between July 1st, 2020 and August 6th, 2020. With the approval of the Institutional Review Board and after signing consent, 41 social work students attending university across multiple provinces in Turkey completed the survey. Participants range in age from 19 to 32 years. Inclusion criteria included: 1) Enrollment in a social work program in Turkey in 2020; 2) Possession of Turkish, English or Russian language skills; and 3) Being over 18 years old.

Measures

The survey instrument was designed by the study Principal Investigators. The survey collected demographic and institutional data. The survey was designed using a mixed-methods approach of quantitative items and qualitative open-ended questions.

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Participants were asked to answer seven questions indicating their age, gender, race, the province in which their university was located, household income, personal income, and residency status.

Educational Characteristics

Students were asked to answer eight questions regarding their educational status. Questions included type of school attended (public or private); type of degree (BSW, MSW, PHD); type of study (full time or part time); type of program (fully residential, fully online, hybrid); years of study at the school; graduation status (Spring 2020 or after); previous online education experience (yes or no); and number of years of previous online education experience (1 year or less, 2-3 years).

Online Education Experience during Pandemic

Students were asked to provide detailed information regarding their online learning experience during the pandemic. The survey asked to students to answer 21 multiple choice questions regarding the personal and academic impact of COVID-19 and related response measures (i.e., shelter-in practices); impact on academic relationships with peers and faculty; as well as students' projections on the short- and long-term impact of the pandemic on social work education and practice. The survey also included the effective practices students experienced that

could inform teaching social work practice in the times of disasters. Questions assessing inequality of access to digital education were also explored. Each of the 21 questions included an “other” category for students to provide their personalized feedback on that question.

The 21 multiple choice questions included: 1) What changes did the pandemic bring to your learning experience?; 2) If you learned online during 2020, what platform has your school been using?; 3) Rank your experience in the online education platform from 5 to 1 (5-Excellent, 1-Poor); 4) What has been working well for you in the online education?; 5) What have been the challenges of remote education?; 6) What are the new opportunities of online courses that improved your learning experience during the pandemic?; 7) How often does a disaster (natural disaster (earthquake, flood, tornado, hurricane), war, epidemic) occur where your school is located?; 8) Did your school have a disaster response plan and plan of education continuity before COVID-19?; 9) Have you ever gone to school during a disaster prior to COVID-19?; 10) What changes did these events create in your learning experience? (If you experienced more than one event, please explain all); 11) How did the pandemic impact your school workload?; 12) How did the pandemic affect your school performance?; 13) How did the pandemic affect your relationship with your classmates?; 14) How did the pandemic impact your instructors and their academic/teaching performance?; 15) What actions did your school take against the pandemic?; 16) What action of the school worked well for you in providing continuity of education during the pandemic?; 17) What roles do social work profession and professionals play during the pandemic?; 18) How do you think COVID-19 experience will change the Social Work profession?; 19) What social work professional skills need to be strengthened to better prepare practitioners during the times of emergencies, like COVID-19 in social work education?; 20) What other social work professional skills need to be incorporated in social work education to prepare students for practicing during a pandemic/disaster in the future?; and 21) What do you think your prospects are in the job market? Students were asked to select all provided options that applied to their experience.

In addition to the multiple-choice questions, students were asked two yes/no questions including: 1) Has the physical health of you or your immediate circle been impacted by COVID-19? Use the space in comment to let us know the detail; 2) Has the mental health of you or your immediate circle been impacted by COVID-19? Use the space in comment to let us know the detail.

Further, students were asked five open-ended questions regarding their online learning experience. These questions included: 1) What changes did these events create in your learning experience? (If you experienced more than one event, please explain all); 2) List three things that worked well in continuing your education while experiencing the event(s) above; 3) List three things that needed to be changed to improve your learning experience during that period; 4) What could have been done differently to be better prepared for such a situation (COVID- 19)?; 5) What could be done to improve the experience of remote education?

Lastly, students were able to provide any additional information they wanted to share regarding their online learning experience at the end of the survey.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 20 (SPSS Inc., 2011). Chi-squares were used to describe the sample. P values equal to or less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Conventional content analysis was used to analyze qualitative data, a widely accepted methodology that allows for the description of qualitative data through a systematic process of coding and classification, (Elo & Kyngas, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Participants' responses were reviewed by all authors to identify recurring themes. Initial coding was conducted independently after which team meetings were held to review the categories and idiosyncratic and/or redundant responses were removed. In the case of discrepancies, definitions of the categories were clarified, and rating was repeated until inter-rater consistency of at least 80% for these items was reached, per standards in the literature (Shek et al., 2005).

Results

Sociodemographic Characteristics and Learning Environment

Table 1. describes the characteristics of the sample and the context of the educational program attended. Overall, a majority of the sample identified as female (88%) and as Turkish (96%). The average age of participants was 22 years old (± 2.43). Additionally, student participants were largely studying at the BSW level (83%) and attending a private institution (78%).

In terms of type of program in which students were completing their remote classes, over a half used to be in fully residential program before pandemic, 29.3% were in hybrid program (a mix of online and residential program), and 2.4% were in a fully online social work program. Majority of the participants (61%) has never taken online courses in their current degree before COVID-19 pandemic. When asked to rank their experience in their online education platform on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=poor and 5=excellent, the majority of participants (76.5%) ranked their experience as 3 and above. The average rating was 3 ($SD \pm .83$). In terms of the factors contributing to this rating of overall experiences, approximately 50% of the participants reported no change in their personal academic performance, 13% reported they had better academic performance in their remote classes, whereas 38% of participants experienced lower personal academic performance. About 45% of participants reported their instructor's academic/teaching performance decreased during their online classes, 32% reported their instructors' academic/teaching performance did not change, and 23% reported their instructors had improved their academic/teaching performance. Additionally, some participants felt more distant from their professors (31%); others reported feeling more distant from their classmates (29%); while others reported feeling as though they had lost their community (22%). A significant number of students (61%) reported feeling no impact on their relationships with peers as a result of on-campus school closures.

The majority participants (75%) were located in areas where disasters (i.e., earthquakes, floods, tornados, hurricanes, or epidemic) occur ($n=38$). Among those, 50% reported disasters occur but rarely, whereas 16% reported disasters occur sometimes, and 8% reported attending universities in areas where disasters occur frequently. Over 70% of participants reported

attending school during a prior period of disaster (73%). Among those, 44% of the participants went to school during the event of earthquake, 12% during flood, 5% during a hurricane, 5% during an epidemic, 5% during events of chemical, biological, or nuclear hazards, and 2% during tornado. Nevertheless, only 8% of the participants reported that they were aware of their school's disaster response plan and/or plan of education continuity, whereas 84% did not know if their school has a disaster response plan or a plan for education continuity during a crisis period before COVID-19.

Bi-variate analyses were conducted between descriptive variables (age, income, type of school) and rank of the online education, COVID-19's impact on physical health, COVID-19's impact on mental health, and benefits and challenges of the online education (see Table 2). Among these analyses, age, and stress and anxiety, and difficulty in staying on screen for too long; income, and lack of digital learning materials, lack of stable internet connection, and difficulty in engagement in online courses; and type of school and difficulty in engagement in online courses resulted in significant outcomes (See Table 2 below). More specifically, the results showed that those over age 22 reported more experience of stress and anxiety ($\chi^2=6.705$, $p=0.20$), and those younger than 22 years had greater difficulty with staying on a screen for too long ($\chi^2=4.713$, $p=0.40$). Additionally, participants with a monthly income lower than \$500 reported experiencing a lack of digital learning materials ($\chi^2=6.133$, $p=0.28$), a lack of stable internet connection ($\chi^2=4.889$, $p=0.49$), and difficulty with engagement in online courses more so than participants with a monthly income between \$501 and \$5,000 ($\chi^2=9.575$, $p=0.004$). Lastly, participants enrolled in a social work program in private universities reported greater difficulty with engagement in online courses than their counterparts in public universities ($\chi^2=4.772$, $p=0.039$).

Benefits of Online Education

Several benefits were experienced by participants from their remote learning. These benefits reflect three overarching domains including: personal, social and academic (see Table 3). Participants identified the greatest number of benefits in the academic domain, followed by personal benefits and, lastly, social domain benefits.

Participants identified 12 academic benefits related to their online education experience. The most strongly endorsed benefit identified by participants was the continuity of education regardless of immobility (due to lock-down or disease) (66%). Other benefits identified included: digitalization of materials that did not exist prior to the pandemic (27%); new access to global expertise and information (22%); increased use of discussion boards (12%); flexibility of the curriculum (12%); increased class engagement opportunities (10%); smaller assignments (10%); increased availability of instructors/faculty/support (8%); learning about new technological opportunities, such as telehealth etc. (7%); improved grading system (5%); smaller units of teaching content (2%), and better quality of teaching (2%).

Eight personal benefits were reported by participants. These included: less time spent commuting (71%); ability to sleep longer hours (46%); increased flexibility with scheduling

tasks such as study hours and work or household responsibilities (42%); feeling safer at home (39%); convenience of staying home (29%); less pressure of failing the classes (17%); less stress due to an easier/ lower workload (15%); and less distracting or intimidating environment for learning (10%). One participant from Istanbul, the most crowded province of Turkey and infamous for heavy traffic explained,

“Since I was not required to spend time in traffic, I found more time to study. I realized that I was able to focus continuously, and in this way, my performance increased.”

Five social benefits were reported by participants associated with their online education experience during the pandemic. These included: the ability to spend more time with family (32%); increased opportunities for interaction with others through email, chat, phone (22%); receiving more compassion and support from instructors (17%); increased collaborations with peers (5%); and development of support spaces and other interactive events at school (2%).

Continuity of Education

Participants identified various administrative policies and actions that were considered to contribute to their continuity of education as they switched to a remote learning environment during the pandemic. More specifically, participants reported sending residential students home (49%); switching to online education (37%); updating the community about the new developments in the COVID-19 response plan (15%); requiring instructors to be more accessible via phones, or messages (12%); adjusting field practice requirements (7%); successfully implementing the emergency preparedness plan (7%); changing the grading system (5%); providing more mental health and other support to students (5%); providing more financial support (2%); providing electronic devices to students who did not have access to them (2%); and providing technology training to students and faculty (2%).

However, students also reported their universities did not seem prepared for the pandemic and should have been more organized with their response in terms of having the technology and platforms for online classes in place and prepared prior to the rapid spread of the coronavirus. Students commented,

“They should have prepared the education platform in advance; they should have thought about how education should be in such a crisis and had (the plans) ready.”

“They could have improved their technical infrastructure, they could have taken more comprehensive and long-term initiatives instead of making plans and arrangements to save the day. I don't think the university had any plans or preparations for disasters, including COVID.”

“It should have been decided that the lessons should be held remotely in our city without waiting for the emergence of the cases, and foreign students from outside the city should have been sent home earlier. They should have taken (the spread) of COVID into account earlier.”

Challenges with Online Education

Despite the perceived benefits of remote learning and the positively received efforts to provide continuity of education, participants identified several challenges related to their online education. These difficulties largely fell within the academic and personal domains, with more perceived personal than academic challenges (see Table 4).

In terms of academic domain challenges, participants reported five key challenges including: difficulty staying on a screen for classes for extended periods of time (54%); a lower quality of teaching (46%), unpreparedness of instructors in terms of their use of technology (27%); lack of applicability to practice (27%); lack of digital learning materials to facilitate coursework (12%).

Almost twice as many personal domain challenges were identified by participants. These included: social isolation (40%); lack of motivation to focus on classes during pandemic (37%); increased stress and anxiety (32%); difficulty with engagement in online courses (29%); lack of stable internet connection (24%); increased pressure to do well/work more (24%); lack of private space or technology skills (20%); increased familial problems during stay-at-home orders (15%); and personal health issues (7%).

Physical and Mental Health Impact of Covid-19

Table 5 reports on the physical and mental health impact of the pandemic experienced during remote learning. Approximately one-quarter of students reported experiencing a physical impact of COVID-19 (24%). Significantly more participants reported a negative mental health impact from the pandemic (70%). Participants commented on increased anxiety and fear related to virus contagion, increased obsessions and compulsions related to germs and cleanliness, isolation, loneliness. Comments from participants included:

“I cannot sleep at nights, I started going to a psychologist”, “Living with the feeling of loneliness and the threat of death negatively affected me mentally”,

“If I cough, I think I have COVID... if I wash my hands with the brand X, instead of brand Y, there won’t be as many germs.”

Students noted their universities could have helped to address their mental health difficulties by making the student counseling system more modern and functional; providing guidance, social and psychological support to students via Zoom for problems such as anxiety, fear, panic, distraction, and fear of unemployment; increasing face-to-face communication to address isolation; and, developing student-friendly systems that prioritize effective communication and effective counseling.

Participants also reported experiencing increased burden. Approximately 46% reported feeling burdened from having to learn new skills to handle their remote classwork; 20% of

participants mentioned their workload increased due to caregiving responsibilities. Conversely, 7% reported their workload did not change (12%), while others reported a decreased burden resulting from having a lighter workload due to the pandemic (7%).

Preparation for Practice

Participants reported several aspects of social work training they believe need to be modified to account for mid-pandemic and post-pandemic world. Approximately 49% of participants stated social workers would need to improve their interdisciplinary practice skills to enhance communication and collaboration more with other sectors/professions for coordinated disaster response. Some participants emphasized the need to incorporate more disaster response training to be useful (17%). Other participants identified several specific professional skills that need to be strengthened in social work education to better prepare practitioners during the times of global emergencies, such as COVID-19. The skills included crisis management (66%), case management skills to facilitate economic, social, health and mental health support (63%), disaster response, preparedness, mitigation and prevention (61%), contingency planning (54%), psychological therapy skills (49%), addressing inequality and social and economic justice issues (37%), interprofessional practice (27%), advocacy and public policy (15%), and self-care (15%). Telesocial work/teletherapy (68%), technology (49%), and disease management (32%) were the other areas deemed critical social work professional skills that need to be better incorporated into social work education. Students commented universities should prepare for future crises by considering, “horizontal construction instead of tall buildings, creating campuses in large areas, and creating and sharing disaster risk management and plans.”

Interestingly, some participants noted they believe the pandemic will make it easier to practice on macro, mezzo, and micro level as people will have more compassion (24%). Others shared their belief that the pandemic will not change the profession as social workers are already among the first responders during crises and are heavily involved in disaster response, mitigation and organizing communities (29%) and because social work is already interdisciplinary (17%).

Social Work Professional Practice

Participants were asked about their perceptions of the role of social workers during the pandemic and the skills needed for effective practice. Participants identified several ways in which social workers are relevant during times of crisis including the essential role of social workers in terms of: crisis response efforts (68%); preparation planning for disasters (56%); and advocating for vulnerable groups (49%). In contrast, a small minority of participants stated they did not believe social workers should play a key role in disasters (7%).

Despite the important role of social workers, most participants expressed concerns about their prospects in the job market upon graduation. Thirty-three percent (33%) of participants reported being primarily concerned they would not be able to find a job and would be unemployed without job market prospects. Others expressed feeling very anxious about their potential inability to pay student loans (12%). Some participants said they were planning to

postpone their job searches and/or to seek further education (12%), while others stated they were considering looking for jobs in non-social work fields (10%). Only 10% of participants endorsed having no worries or concerns about employment as a social worker upon graduation, noting that social work services will be even more necessary as a result of the pandemic.

Discussion

While several studies have examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in various countries on educational programs (medical students, nursing students, college students, school-aged youth), this is the first study to comprehensively examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic from the social work students' perspective in Turkey, related to the rapid and unanticipated switch to remote learning. We examined several important areas including: 1) the benefits of online learning; 2) the challenges of online learning; 3) the mental health and physical health impact of the pandemic; 4) strengths and limitations of administrative actions to provide continuity of education; 5) student perceptions of current training and areas that need to be modified; and 6) the future of the social work profession and role of social workers in times crisis.

The majority of students in this study rated their remote learning experience as fair or above and identified more benefits associated with their online education during the pandemic than challenges. For example, findings indicate that students experienced a rather positive remote learning experience due largely to increased flexibility, convenience, efficient use of class time, increased communication with peers and faculty, new access to digitalized course material and global knowledge and expertise. However, participants also made it clear that these benefits were feasible because they had new and increased access to and were able to receive greater psychosocial and emotional support via new avenues for services created by their universities, increased communication and engagement with peers, more compassionate and supportive interactions with faculty, and improved access to university psychological and counseling services. These findings highlight the importance of acknowledging the psychosocial needs of students and of providing for and supporting their mental health and well-being in as much as their coursework and classroom activities.

Participants also noted a number of significant barriers to learning in a remote environment during the pandemic that warrant consideration as universities engage in contingency planning to manage potential future waves of the COVID-19 pandemic and other global public health crises. Most notably, our findings indicate students responded positively to policies that promoted communication between the university and students as changes in instruction and procedures unfolded in response to the pandemic, supported the switch to remote learning via providing trainings to the university community on the use of technology and providing access to students to electronic devices to facilitate their on-going remote education, and that addressed the emotional and psychological needs of the students in addition to their educational needs. On the other hand, students felt their universities needed to be faster and more organized in their response. Students were able to recognize the failure of their universities to have an adequate contingency plan in place and this contributed to the negative experience. These findings indicate the importance of having a planned platform for online learning with the

associated technological requirements in place to facilitate a smooth transition to remote learning, if needed.

We found older students reported greater challenges with technology and online education than younger students and greater stress and anxiety. This is not necessarily surprising as older students most likely have greater responsibilities related to caregiving and managing the home than younger students and younger individuals have a greater ease of use of technology (Staddon, 2020). Some studies have further found mature students (defined as age 21 and over) are less likely to engage with technology than younger people (Czaja et al., 2006; Hawthorne, 2007) and have lower confidence in their technology use (Broady, 21010).

Additionally, we found income had an impact on the remote education experience those with lower monthly income struggling with a lack of digital learning materials, lack of stable internet connection, and overall difficulty engaging with online courses more so than participants with a higher monthly income. This is consistent with research in other countries that has found socioeconomic conditions directly impact not only the use of but also the acceptance of online learning (Jung, 2014). These findings highlight the social and economic inequities present prior to the start of the pandemic are exacerbated as a result of mitigation policies. Previous research in other low- and middle-income countries has described how pre-existing mezzo level factors, like low-income, serve to further disenfranchise already struggling individuals, turning the pandemic into a complex emergency for low-resourced populations (Alonzo et al., 2021).

Additionally, students noted specific challenges related to their remote learning experiences. A general lack of familiarity, knowledge and preparedness on behalf of faculty to effectively modify teaching for an online environment was noted as a key barrier to online learning such that even when students might themselves feel technologically competent and prepared for learning, the quality of teaching and instructors' technological skill and teaching style negatively impacted their learning. Further, our findings indicate in addition to the quality and nature of instruction, student ability to engage in and focus on coursework was negatively impacted by their own stress, anxiety, fear, and feelings of social isolation and increased pressure to perform well in classes. To date, multiple studies have reported similar findings regarding increased anxiety and stress related to the pandemic in multiple settings and populations (Alonzo et al., Cao et al., 2020; 2021a; 2021b; Pedro, 2020). Finding a private space to conduct online sessions and study in an undistracted manner were further impacted by increased family problems and responsibilities related to the pandemic. These findings are related to previous research examining online education during COVID-19 in other populations that found students who preferred in-person classes struggled more with emergency online learning and had lower cognitive engagement than those who had a positive attitude toward online learning (Albelbisi & Yasop, 2019).

Our findings show for some students, this fear, stress and anxiety extends beyond the pandemic to the future of the social work profession. Our findings suggest that from the student perspective, current social work educational curricula have not sufficiently prepared them to practice in a mid- or post-pandemic environment. Students reported feeling inadequate preparation in terms of case management skills; disaster response, preparedness, mitigation and prevention; addressing structural factors such as, inequality and social and economic justice; tele

and virtual health practices; and interdisciplinary work. Many questioned all together the role of social workers in times of crisis and questioned their future employment prospects, concerned they would not be able to find a job within the social field based on their training. These findings have significant implications for social work education. Curriculum needs to be developed to better prepare students to understand their role and function in times of crisis and prepare them with the skills needed to effectively serve their communities. A greater emphasis on disaster planning and management are more relevant now than ever and students recognize they need these skills to be able to carry out their role. Rather than an elective course or one lecture in a required practice course, the skills identified need to become part of the core curriculum required of all social work students to ensure the next generation of practitioners are able to practice in an interdisciplinary, global world struggling to manage and eventually recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and better prepared to manage future crises. Social workers are critical in this recovery.

Based on our findings, we make the following 10 recommendations for the future of social education programs

1. Develop and disseminate to the school community a clear and responsive emergency preparedness plans for future crises, including technological considerations and educational platforms to be used.
2. Deliver course content in smaller module to facilitate and enhance student focus and engagement.
3. Build in opportunities for interaction with peers and faculty via use of discussion boards, breakout rooms, small group activities.
4. Provide training to faculty to strengthen their online teaching skills.
5. Provide ongoing access to multi-modal forms of psychosocial supports (virtual and/or in-person peer support groups and access to university counseling services and interactive events).
6. Incorporate a focus on crisis and disaster management and complex emergencies into social work curricula.
7. Increase training on multi-disciplinary work to address structural factors (i.e., economic inequity).
8. Incorporate key aspects of online learning into standard educational practices, even after the pandemic remits including, 1) on-going development of and access to digitalized materials; encouraging use of global knowledge and expertise; and incorporation of asynchronous material.
9. Address inequities in access to technology in the student population to avoid marginalizing mature and/lower-income students.
10. Increase relevance of social work practice by including training in responsive modes of practice in the curriculum including ethical and effective telehealth and virtual health practices and the use of AI.

Limitations

There are several methodological limitations of the study that are important to consider. Despite efforts to recruit MSW and PHD level participants, our sample was largely comprised of BSW students. It may be that the challenges related to graduate level education are different than those experienced at the BSW and therefore findings should be applied to that population with caution. BSW students may have been more displeased with their online experience and hence motivated to share their complaints or conversely, may have been less disrupted and stressed and have more time to participate in the study. Future research should explore the experience of graduate students to better understand their unique challenges and experience. Additionally, our sample was largely Turkish with little representation of the Kurdish population, and therefore findings may not be generalizable to that population. Also, we were unable to examine differences in remote learning experiences across genders as we had a very small sample of male respondents. It may be that this reflects cultural values around gender roles/norms and help-seeking that would make it more likely for females to openly share information about their physical health and well-being and learning difficulties whereas males would be less likely to disclose what may be perceived as weakness. Nevertheless, future research should explore this important area to better address the potentially differential needs and experiences of social work students across genders. Additionally, our response rate of 31% was rather low. It may have been students were already overwhelmed with online learning requirements and the idea of having to complete yet another digital task was not appealing, or that they had too little time given constraints of shelter-at-home orders while managing family responsibilities to complete additional work. Nevertheless, the findings point to important implications for social work education that should be further evaluated in larger studies. Finally, given that survey completion was voluntary, it may be the more motivated students and those with more experience with technology self-selected to participate in the study. Future research should explore the experience of social workers who are not as comfortable with technology, and yet, were forced to participate in remote education.

Conclusion

Our findings highlight the need for flexibility and increased attention to mental health and psychosocial well-being in addition to modifying teaching practices to ensure a positive social work educational experience during times of global crisis. Efforts to support students during their online education should account for differential learning needs and experiences according to age and income. Social work programs need to develop contingency plans for future crises that accommodate the need for interactive technology in online social work classrooms and that stimulate the human interaction, engagement and sense of belonging which are such a critical component of social education.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample

Sociodemographic Characteristic	N (%)	Mean ($\pm$ SD)
Age (in years)		22 ($\pm$ 2.43)
Sex		
Female	35 (88)	
Male	4 (20)	
Non-binary	1 (2)	
Income		
\$0-\$200	1 (2)	
\$201-\$500	12 (29)	
\$501-\$1,000	15 (37)	
\$ 1,001-\$2,000	7 (17)	
\$2,001-\$3,000	4 (10)	
\$3,001-\$5,000	2 (5)	
Location of the University		
Istanbul	28 (70)	
Ankara	4 (1)	
Sakarya	2 (5)	
Bingol	1 (2.4)	
Other (Province not reported)	5 (12)	
Type of School		
Private	32 (78)	
Public	9 (22)	
Type of degree		
Bachelor of Social Work	34 (83)	
Master of Social Work	5 (12)	
PhD/DSW student	2 (5)	
Year at the school		
<1 year	3 (7)	
1-2 years	12 (29)	
2-3 years	17 (42)	
3+	9 (22)	
Ever taken online courses pre-COVID		
Yes	16 (39)	
No	25 (61)	
Length of online courses pre-COVID		
<1 year	12 (75)	
2-3 years	4 (25)	

Table 2. Bivariate Analysis of Factors Impacting Online Education Experience during Pandemic

Sociodemographic Characteristic and Impact on Online Education Experience	Reported (n)	Not Reported (n)	Chi- square	df	p-value Fisher's exact (2-sided)
Stress and anxiety					
Age					
<22 years old	6	23	6.705	1	.020
23+	7	4			
Difficulty in staying on a screen for too long					
Age					
≤22 years old	19	10	4.713	1	.040
23+	3	8			
Lack of digital learning materials					
Income					
≤\$500	4	9	6.133	1	.028
\$501-\$5,000	1	27			
Lack of stable internet connection					
Income					
≤\$500	6	7	4.889	1	.049
\$501-\$5,000	4	24			
Difficulty in engagement in online courses					
Income					
≤\$500	8	5	9.575	1	.004
\$501-\$5,000	4	24			
Difficulty in engagement in online courses					
Type of School					
Public	0	9	4.772	1	.039
Private	12	20			

Table 3. Challenges and Benefits to Remote Education during COVID-19

Domain Impacted by Pandemic	Participants Reporting N=41 (%)
Academic	
Continuity of education regardless of immobility	27 (66)
New digitalization of material	11 (27)
New access to global knowledge/information	9 (22)
Increased interaction via email, chat, phone	9 (22)
Increased use of discussion boards	11(12)
Flexibility of curriculum	5 (12)
Increased class engagement opportunities	4 (10)

Smaller units of teaching content	4 (10)
Smaller assignments	4 (10)
Increased availability of instructors/faculty/support	3 (7)
Learning about new technological opportunities	3 (7)
Improved grading system	1 (2)
Better quality teaching	1 (2)
Personal	
Less time commuting	29 (71)
Ability to sleep longer hours	19 (46)
Flexibility with scheduling activities	17 (42)
Feeling safer at home	16 (39)
Convenience of staying home	12 (29)
Less pressure of failing classes	7 (17)
Less stress due to reduced workload	6 (15)
Less distracting/intimidating environment	4 (10)
Social	
Increased time with family	13 (32)
Increased interaction with others via email, chat, phone	9 (22)
More compassion and support from teachers	7 (17)
Increased collaboration with peers	2 (5)
Development of supportive spaces and interactive events	1 (2)

Table 4. Challenges of Remote Education during COVID-19	
Domain Impacted by Pandemic	Participants Reporting N=41 (%)
Academic	
Difficulty staying on a screen for classes for extended periods of time	22 (54)
Lower quality of teaching	19 (46)
Unpreparedness of instructors in terms of their use of technology	11 (27)
Lack of applicability to practice	11 (27)
Lack of digital learning materials to facilitate coursework	5 (12)
Personal	
Social isolation	16 (40)
Lack of motivation for class	15 (37)
Increased stress and anxiety	13 (32)
Difficulty with engaging in online classes	12 (29)
Lack of stable internet connection	10 (24)
Increased pressure to perform well/work more	10 (24)
Lack of private space or technology skills	8 (20)
Increased family problems during stay-at-home orders	6 (15)
Personal health issues	3 (7)

Table 5. Physical and Mental health Impact of COVID-19 during Remote Education	
	Participants Reporting n (%)
Physical Health	
Yes	8 (24%)
No	25 (76%)
Fear, Anxiety, Stress	
Yes	23 (70%)
No	10 (30%)
Burden	
Yes	19 (46%)
No	8 (20%)