



University Life During the Pandemic: Experiences and Expectations of Teacher Candidates

Pandemi Döneminde Üniversite Hayatı: Öğretmen Adaylarının Deneyimleri ve Beklentileri

Sadegül Akbaba Altun^{a1}

^aBaşkent University, Ankara, Türkiye

Abstract

This study aims to understand the experiences of pre-service teachers who began their university education during the Fall semester of 2020–2021, amidst the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Designed as a qualitative case study, the research analyses letters written thematically by students who started university online and were permitted to attend only a single face-to-face course. The data reveal the emotional, academic, and social challenges students faced, as well as the coping strategies they developed during this period. The findings show that participants experienced feelings of loneliness, alienation, and uncertainty; however, they also attempted to overcome these difficulties by internalising their teacher identity, building resilience, and seeking solidarity. These findings underscore the critical need for robust psychosocial support mechanisms for preservice teachers in higher education during crises.

Keywords: *Pandemic, online education, preservice teachers, university transition, teacher identity, emotional experiences, case study.*

Öz

Bu araştırma, COVID-19 pandemisinin etkili olduğu 2020-2021 güz döneminde üniversiteye adım atan öğretmen adaylarının yaşantılarını anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Durum çalışması deseninde yürütülen bu nitel çalışmada, üniversiteye çevrim içi olarak başlayan ve yalnızca bir dersi yüz yüze alabilen öğretmen adaylarının kaleme aldığı mektuplar tematik olarak analiz edilmiştir. Veriler, duygusal, akademik ve sosyal boyutlarda öğrencilerin yaşadığı zorlukları ve bu süreçte geliştirdikleri başa çıkma stratejilerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, adayların yalnızlık, yabancılaşma ve belirsizlik gibi duygularla karşılaştıklarını; ancak öğretmenlik kimliğini içselleştirme, direnç geliştirme ve dayanışma gibi yollarla bu zorluklarla baş etmeye çalıştıklarını göstermektedir. Araştırma, pandemi döneminde yükseköğretim kurumlarında özellikle öğretmen adaylarına yönelik psikososyal destek mekanizmalarının önemine dikkat çekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Pandemi, çevrimiçi eğitim, öğretmen adayları, üniversiteye geçiş, öğretmen kimliği, duygusal deneyimler, durum çalışması.*

© 2025 Başkent University Press, Başkent University Journal of Education. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly transformed teacher education worldwide, reshaping the experiences and identities of preservice teachers. The abrupt shift from face-to-face instruction to remote learning disrupted established pedagogical practices and demanded new forms of resilience, adaptability, and emotional regulation among teacher candidates (Li et al., 2022). For many students' entering teacher education during this period, the university experience was characterised by uncertainty, digital fatigue, and a redefinition of professional expectations. Yet, the pandemic also provided a unique context for examining how preservice teachers construct meaning, manage stress, and sustain motivation amid crisis conditions.

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: Sadegül Akbaba Altun, Department of Educational Science, Faculty of Education, Başkent University, Ankara, Türkiye. E-mail address: akbabas@baskent.edu.tr, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5690-6088.

Received Date: July 25th, 2025. Acceptance Date: November 4th, 2025.

The psychological impact of the pandemic extended beyond academic adaptation; it challenged preservice teachers' well-being, self-efficacy, and sense of purpose. As studies highlight, psychological resilience and self-compassion have emerged as crucial protective factors enabling individuals to navigate adversity, maintain mental health, and continue professional growth (Zümbül, 2019; Taşdemir & Murat, 2021; Beaumont, 2016). Exploring these factors within teacher education is essential for understanding how future educators develop the emotional and cognitive resources required for teaching in complex and unpredictable environments.

In addition to individual strengths, contextual and relational factors—such as social support, sense of community, and perceived meaning in life—contribute to teachers' adaptive functioning (Demirbaş, 2010; Fokkens-Bruinsma et al., 2024). The intersection of these dimensions offers a comprehensive perspective on teacher resilience as both a personal capacity and a socially embedded process. In qualitative research, it is essential to understand and interpret individuals' experiences within their context. This study aims to explore the experiences of pre-service teachers who began their university education during the pandemic and to examine in depth their emotional, social, and professional development processes. More specifically, the following questions were sought: How did these pre-service teachers, who began university life online during the pandemic, experience this period? What emotional, social, and professional expectations, challenges, and transformations did they encounter?

2. Related Research

For students newly entering higher education, the COVID-19 pandemic represented not only a health crisis but also a transitional period that directly influenced their personal, social, and professional development. Studies on university entry experiences of pre-service teachers highlight the multifaceted, often contradictory nature of this process. This section thematically reviews the relevant literature on pre-service teachers' transition to university during the pandemic and links it to the study's research problem.

2.1. *Psychological Resilience in Preservice Teachers*

Resilience, broadly defined as the capacity to adapt positively in the face of adversity, has been widely investigated in teacher education. Studies conducted prior to and during the pandemic reveal that preservice teachers' resilience is shaped by cognitive flexibility, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation skills (Taşdemir & Murat, 2021). Quantitative research among Turkish teacher candidates demonstrates that cognitive flexibility directly predicts resilience and that positive cognitive emotion regulation strategies partially mediate this relationship (Taşdemir & Murat, 2021).

Resilience is not static; it develops through lived experiences, reflective practice, and contextual influences. Studies by Güngör (2017) and Çelik (2017) revealed that senior preservice teachers reported higher resilience levels than first-year students, suggesting that exposure to teaching practice strengthens adaptive coping. Gender and socioeconomic factors also interact with resilience, as shown by Hoşoğlu et al. (2018), who reported that male preservice teachers and those from higher-income families exhibited greater resilience scores. These findings underscore the multidimensional nature of resilience, influenced by both personal traits and social environments.

2.2. *Self-Compassion and Well-Being*

Beyond resilience, self-compassion has been identified as a key psychological construct supporting well-being and emotional regulation. Neff (2003) conceptualised self-compassion as encompassing self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness—three interrelated components that allow individuals to respond to failure and suffering with understanding rather than self-criticism. In teacher education, fostering self-compassion contributes to emotional balance and reduces the risk of burnout and perfectionism (Beaumont, 2016). Beaumont argues that compassion-based training programs can help preservice teachers and health-related professionals manage empathic fatigue, develop healthier coping mechanisms, and cultivate sustainable professional empathy.

Empirical findings further reinforce the link between self-compassion, mindfulness, and psychological well-being. Zümbül (2019) demonstrated that both mindfulness and forgiveness significantly predict preservice teachers' psychological well-being, explaining nearly half of the variance. These constructs enable teacher candidates to maintain emotional equilibrium, promote reflective awareness, and strengthen interpersonal relationships. Together, self-compassion and mindfulness function as protective resources that buffer the effects of stress and enhance resilience.

2.3. Coping and Adaptation during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic created an unprecedented context for examining resilience in action. Research across international settings highlights preservice teachers' capacity to adapt to remote teaching, technological integration, and emotional strain (Shange & de Jager, 2024; Fokkens-Bruinsma et al., 2024). Shange and de Jager (2024) found that South African teacher candidates demonstrated high adaptability, creatively using digital platforms and developing confidence in online instruction. Similarly, Fokkens-Bruinsma et al. (2024) reported that social support and problem-solving strategies were the most significant predictors of resilience, while self-efficacy alone did not ensure coping success. These results reveal that resilience is relational as much as individual—anchored in collaboration, communication, and shared meaning-making.

Complementary evidence from Li et al. (2022) underscores the systemic challenges faced by teacher education programs, including limited preparation for digital pedagogy, disrupted practicum experiences, and heightened psychological stress. Yet, many teacher candidates leveraged the situation as an opportunity for personal growth, technological skill development, and renewed professional identity. Collectively, these studies portray pandemic-era teacher education as a testing ground for resilience, where adaptation, reflection, and innovation coexisted with uncertainty and emotional exhaustion.

2.4. Career Concerns and Growth Opportunities

While the pandemic intensified career-related anxiety, it also prompted preservice teachers to re-evaluate professional goals and competencies. Şensoy Murt and Erdur-Baker (2023) explored how teacher candidates in Turkey perceived the pandemic as both a barrier and a catalyst in their career development. Grounded in Krumboltz's Planned Happenstance Theory, their findings indicate that candidates who adopted proactive coping and self-care strategies were able to identify new opportunities within crisis conditions—including digital pedagogy, empathy, and crisis management skills. Such adaptive framing aligns with the broader notion of resilience as transformative growth rather than mere recovery.

Overall, the literature converges on the idea that preservice teachers' resilience is a multifaceted construct encompassing psychological, emotional, and contextual dimensions. Self-compassion, mindfulness, and cognitive flexibility interact with social and institutional factors to shape teachers' capacity to thrive amid adversity. Understanding these interconnections is crucial for designing teacher education programs that nurture not only professional competence but also emotional sustainability and humanistic awareness.

3. Methodology

As this study aims to deeply understand the lived experiences of pre-service teachers who began university during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was conducted using the *case study* method, one of the qualitative research designs. Case studies seek to examine a specific phenomenon or process within a particular context in a comprehensive and detailed manner (Yin, 2018). In this research, the case under investigation is the experience of starting university online during the pandemic and the impact of this process on pre-service teachers' personal and professional development. Given its focus on participants' lived experiences, the study also contains *narrative* elements.

Research Context

The context of this research is the Fall semester of the 2020–2021 academic year, during which the COVID-19 pandemic was affecting the entire world. As in all other universities in Türkiye, Başkent University switched to remote instruction. However, the university senate decided that at least one course in each faculty would be conducted face-to-face. Within this framework, the "Introduction to Education" course, taken by first-year students in the Faculty of Education, was conducted in person with special permission.

A total of 39 first-year students from five different teaching programs residing in Ankara enrolled in this course. Students were admitted to campus only for this course, using special entry permits issued by the university administration. This situation placed the participant group in a unique context: they had prepared for university entrance exams from home under pandemic restrictions, had adapted to online education, yet had experienced only one course face-to-face on campus.

In Türkiye, admission to higher education is based on a centralised two-stage examination system. The first stage involves the Basic Proficiency Test (TYT), followed by the Field Proficiency Tests (AYT), which assess students' knowledge in their preferred academic fields. This examination process is known for being highly stressful and

competitive for both students and their families. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, additional challenges such as uncertainty, isolation, and remote learning were introduced into this process in 2020. Particularly, the closure of all schools as of March 12, 2020, forced candidates to prepare for these exams at home, relying solely on personal effort and digital tools. Thus, the participant group constitutes a unique sample, having navigated not only the inherent stress of university entrance exams but also the additional psychological and academic burdens imposed by the pandemic.

Participants

The participants in this study were 23 pre-service teachers enrolled in the “EDUC 100–08: Introduction to Education” course at the Faculty of Education, Başkent University, during the Fall semester of the 2020–2021 academic year. As part of the course, these students completed a letter-writing assignment titled *"Welcome to University."* All participants were first-year students enrolled in five different teacher education programs. Of the participants, 19 were female, and four were male. The profiles of the participants are presented in the table below:

Table 1
Profiles of Participating Pre-Service Teachers

Participant Code	Teacher Education Program	Gender
K1	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K2	Turkish Language Teaching	Male
K3	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Female
K4	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K5	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Female
K6	Elementary Mathematics Teaching	Female
K7	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Female
K8	Turkish Language Teaching	Male
K9	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Female
K10	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K11	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K12	Turkish Language Teaching	Male
K13	Guidance and Psychological Counseling	Male
K14	Preschool Teaching	Female
K15	Primary School Teaching	Female
K16	Primary School Teaching	Female
K17	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K18	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K19	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K20	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K22	Turkish Language Teaching	Female
K23	Turkish Language Teaching	Female

As shown in Table 1, 23 teacher candidates (19 female, four male) participated in this study. These participants constitute a purposeful sample, as they began university during an intense period of the pandemic and took their first steps toward the teaching profession under these conditions.

Data Collection Tools

The data were collected through guided open-ended letters written by pre-service teachers about their experiences of starting university. Participants were asked to describe the emotions, thoughts, expectations, and challenges they experienced when beginning university during the pandemic. This approach enabled them to express their subjective experiences in a natural and sincere manner. The letter-writing method is a powerful data collection tool in qualitative

research as it allows individuals to reflect on their inner world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The primary data source consisted of 23 handwritten or typed letters written in December 2020, during the first academic year of the pandemic. These letters were sealed and stored securely by the researcher and were not opened until 2024, four years later. Upon retrieval, participants were re-contacted for consent, and the letters were transcribed verbatim into digital format for analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected letters were analysed using content analysis. The analysis process included the following stages:

1. Preliminary reading of the letters to gain an overall impression
2. Coding of meaningful statements
3. Grouping similar codes under common themes
4. Naming and describing the themes

To minimise subjective bias during analysis, a second researcher conducted comparative coding, and consensus was reached on the final themes. To ensure validity, direct quotations from participant letters were used to support the themes. Participation in the study was voluntary, and principles of confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed. Participant data were anonymised using codes, and real names were never used. The study was conducted with ethical approval from the relevant university ethics committee (Approval No: E-62310886-605-369253, dated August 15, 2024).

4. Findings

The findings are structured according to how students began their letters, how they progressed through various topics, their short- and long-term expectations, the impacts of the pandemic, coping strategies, experiences of resilience and self-compassion, and how they concluded their letters. Those findings were summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis of Pre-Service Teachers' Letters during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
1. Beginnings of the Letters	Self-greetings	Students started their letters by addressing themselves, reflecting sincerity and self-reflection.	"Hello, me from four years later. First of all, I want to congratulate you..." (K6)
	Self-introduction	Some students introduced themselves by sharing personal or academic background.	"I am a first-year student in the Turkish Language Teaching program at Başkent University..." (K1)
	Reference to past events	Students referred to prior experiences or memories, resembling diary entries.	"Do you remember how you used to study for the university entrance exam...?" (K3)
	University entry story	Some began with their journey of getting into university and the initial challenges.	"I worked really hard to get into a university." (K2)
	Program choice story	A few reflected on their choice of academic field and family influence.	"I chose Turkish Language Teaching because I believed if my mom is happy, I would be happy too." (K4)

Table 2 - continued

Theme	Sub-theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
2. Impact of the Pandemic	Educational process	Students discussed the challenges of distance education and adaptation.	“Online classes were boring and exhausting. But these days will pass, we will overcome.” (K20)
	Psychological impacts	Students experienced loneliness, stress, and decreased motivation.	“Studying for days on end without leaving the house was mentally exhausting.” (K12)
	Social life	Lack of socialisation and peer contact during lockdown.	“I just started university but haven’t been able to experience university life due to the pandemic.” (K17)
	Hope for the future	Students expressed optimism and desire for the pandemic to end.	“I hope this pandemic ends soon and we can return to face-to-face education.” (K8)
3. Short- and Long-Term Expectations	Short-term goals	Focused on academic success and completing education.	“I hope my grades are high and that I graduate with distinction.” (K2)
	Long-term career goals	Becoming a good teacher or professor, professional self-realisation.	“I want to see myself walking out of the university gates, ready for my profession.” (K16)
	Contribution to society	Aspiration to be useful and make a difference through teaching.	“After four years, I want to help my country achieve a better future through education.” (K12)
4. Coping Strategies	Positive thinking	Maintaining hope and optimism during difficulties.	“My belief in better days ahead kept me from giving up.” (K12)
	Self-kindness	Practising self-compassion and self-acceptance.	“Love yourself. You are very special and valuable.” (K5)
	Goal setting	Maintaining determination and focusing on future aims.	“Never give up, Aleyna. You’ll fall, but that will make you stronger.” (K7)
	Emotional resilience	Developing strength through overcoming adversity.	“You have always been strong; every time you fell, you got up stronger.” (K14)
	Social support	Family and friends as emotional anchors.	“Throughout the pandemic, I stayed in constant contact with my family and friends.” (K10)
	Humour and mindfulness	Using humour and mindfulness to manage stress.	“Being able to laugh even during hard times relaxes me.” (K8)
5. Conclusions of the Letters	Personal advice	Ending letters with advice or reminders for future selves.	“You have the power to achieve anything you want. Life is moving forward.” (K3)
	Expectations for the future	Hoping to achieve success, happiness, and stability.	“I hope I have made my family proud.” (K1)
	Self-compassion and motivation	Expressing love, acceptance, and encouragement.	“Love yourself. You are special and valuable.” (K5)
	Dialogue with future self	Speaking directly to their future selves to inspire or comfort.	“Yes, Esma of the future—you’ve reached the end of this journey.” (K21)
	Realisation of dreams	Wishing for future goals and dreams to be fulfilled.	“When I read this letter, I hope all my dreams have come true.” (K7)

How did students begin their letters?

The students generally began their letters with greetings and brief self-introductions. At the start of the letters, various approaches were used, such as offering greetings, introducing themselves, and referring to past events. The following section analyses the students’ opening styles, supported by excerpts from their letters:

1. Self-Greetings

Many students began by addressing themselves, which suggests a sincere and heartfelt tone throughout the letters:

"Hello, me from four years later. First of all, I want to congratulate you. Because in this difficult life, you achieved something truly hard. You graduated from university." (K6)

"Dear Me, How are you? I hope you feel happy while reading this letter." (K16)

2. Self-Introduction

Some students introduced themselves at the beginning, often including personal and academic details:

"I am a first-year student in the Turkish Language Teaching program at Başkent University..." (K1)

"Hi, I'm ..., born on December 1, 2000, in Ankara. Originally from Şanlıurfa. I have four siblings and I'm a first-year Turkish Language Teaching student at Başkent University." (K10)

3. Reference to Past Events

Other students began their letters by referring to past experiences, giving the text a tone similar to a personal diary or memoir:

"Hi S..... Today is December 3, 2020. Do you remember how you used to study for the university entrance exam exactly a year ago? How imagining university life motivated you when you were struggling?" (K3)

"First of all, greetings to the Y... of four years in the future." (K3)

4. University Entry Story

Some students opened with the story of how they got into university, reflecting on their challenges and achievements:

"I worked really hard to get into a university." (K2)

"The process of starting university was a bit challenging due to current circumstances." (K8)

5. Program Entry Story

Some students began by describing how they chose their academic department, often influenced by personal preference or family:

"Back in middle school, I used to say I wanted to be a Turkish teacher because of the teachers I admired." (K11)

"I chose Turkish Language Teaching because I believed if my mom is happy, I would be happy too." (K4)

Overall, the beginnings of students' letters reflect a predominantly personal and sincere tone. The use of self-greetings, self-introductions, and references to past events demonstrates the emotional openness and individuality of each student's narrative style.

What did students write about after the introduction?

After their openings, students mainly focused on three interconnected themes: the impact of the pandemic, future goals and hopes, and self-compassionate resilience.

1. Impacts of the Pandemic

The pandemic significantly affected students' academic and social lives, a theme frequently emphasised in the letters. Issues such as remote learning, social isolation, psychological challenges, and studying under pandemic conditions were commonly mentioned:

"The process of coming to university was a bit difficult due to current conditions. The COVID-19 virus, which has affected the whole world, also impacted our country." (K8)

"The first semester went well. But when the second semester started, the coronavirus appeared and schools were suspended. We switched to online learning. I couldn't study at home the way I wanted to. It was not productive for me at all." (K11)

2. Future Goals and Hopes

Students shared in detail what they wanted to achieve in the future. Frequently cited aspirations included professional success, personal development, graduation, and the hope that the pandemic would end:

"One of my biggest dreams right now is to study hard and become a professor. I want to see myself not having given up on this dream, but rather having taken a step closer to it." (K2)

"I hope four years from now, my supporters will still be by my side." (K1)

3. Self-Compassionate Resilience

Another recurring theme was *self-compassionate resilience*. Students emphasised their efforts to stay motivated and their determination to overcome difficulties:

"Note to Sinem: You have the power to achieve anything you want. So much will change for you over the next four years. Life goes on." (K3)

"Never give up, Aleyna. There will be times you fall, make mistakes, and go wrong. But those things will only make you stronger." (K7)

4. University Life and Courses

Letters also reflected on the students' expectations for university life and the realities of distance learning. They described the limited face-to-face opportunities and the struggles of engaging with coursework remotely:

"Due to the pandemic, we only come to our closed school on Fridays with permission from the ministry. Today is one of those days." (K1)

"Right now, I'm writing this letter in our house in Elvankent, during the COVID-19 lockdown, surrounded by many assignments." (K5)

In summary, the students' letters revolved around personal experiences, the impact of the pandemic, future aspirations, and themes of self-compassion and resilience. These narratives reflect both emotional and academic dimensions, offering insight into how students coped with challenges and maintained hope for the future. The following sections provide a more detailed account of their lived experiences during the pandemic period.

Student Perspectives on the Impact of the Pandemic

A thematic analysis of students' letters regarding their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed four prominent themes: Educational Process, Psychological Impacts, Social Life, and Hopes for the Future. Each theme is detailed below with illustrative quotes from the students' narratives.

1. Educational Process

The pandemic had a substantial impact on students' educational experiences. Letters frequently referred to the challenges of remote learning, reduced efficiency of instruction, exam preparation difficulties, and obstacles encountered in the university entrance process.

Distance Education – Challenges and Inefficiencies: Students often emphasised the difficulties and inefficiencies associated with remote education during the pandemic:

I studied quite efficiently during the first semester. But when the second semester started, the coronavirus emerged, and schools were suspended. We switched to online education. I couldn't study at home the way I wanted. It wasn't productive at all for me. (K11)

Pandemic online classes are very boring and exhausting. Your eyesight hasn't deteriorated, right? We're in the ninth month of the pandemic. There's a curfew. I need a permit to attend Friday classes. Tomorrow is my first school day with that permit. You know how this all ends, but I don't. These days will pass, they will end, we will overcome. (K20)

Distance Education – Opportunities and Flexibility: While students noted the challenges, they also acknowledged the flexibility and opportunities afforded by remote education:

"Even though it was online, taking other classes also made me happy. School isn't just a building with four walls and a roof—school is everywhere. What matters is the will to learn and struggle, even under difficult circumstances." (K8)

Exam Preparation and University Admission: Students described the additional burdens the pandemic placed on the already stressful university entrance process:

"The process of coming to university was quite difficult under current conditions. The COVID-19 virus that spread globally also affected our country." (K8)

"I did my best to be as unaffected as possible by the negative conditions of the pandemic. Studying for days on end without leaving the house was mentally exhausting. But my belief in better days ahead kept me going." (K12)

2. Psychological Impacts

The letters also reflected the emotional toll of the pandemic. Students frequently mentioned feelings of loneliness, isolation, and decreased motivation, as well as efforts to remain resilient and hopeful.

Loneliness and Isolation: Several students highlighted the emotional burden of social isolation due to lockdowns:

"I'm writing this letter during the lockdown, surrounded by many assignments, in our house in Elvankent." (K5)

"Pandemic online classes are exhausting. We're in the ninth month of COVID. There's a curfew. I have a permit to attend class on Fridays. Tomorrow is my first time going to school with it." (K20)

Motivation and Resilience: Despite challenges, students demonstrated resilience by maintaining hope and motivation:

"I did my best to be as unaffected as possible by the pandemic's negative conditions. Studying at home for days was mentally draining. But my belief in brighter days ahead kept me from giving up." (K12)

"Never give up, A... You will fall, make mistakes, and go wrong—but those things will only make you stronger." (K7)

3. Social Life

The pandemic deeply affected students' social lives, with social isolation and a lack of peer interaction being common concerns.

Social Isolation: Students described the disappointment of not being able to fully experience university life:

"I'm writing this letter as someone who just started university but hasn't been able to experience university life due to the pandemic. To me, university has been nothing but classes and assignments so far." (K17)

"Right now, I'm in the Guidance and Psychological Counseling department, exactly where I wanted to be. But school is not offering in-person classes. I only come to one class per week." (K5)

Relationships with Family and Friends: Students expressed gratitude to their families and friends for their emotional support during this difficult period:

"I hope four years from now they are still supporting me and staying by my side." (K1)

"I'd like to thank my beloved family, friends, and my very special girlfriend for standing by me and not withholding their support during this journey." (K2)

4. Hopes for the Future

A major theme in the letters was the hope that the pandemic would end and that normal life would resume. These future-oriented aspirations were often linked to students' professional goals and personal development.

Desire for the End of the Pandemic: Students expressed their wish for a return to face-to-face education and normal routines:

"I hope this pandemic ends soon in both our country and the world, and that we can complete our education and training with our teachers and classmates, face-to-face as in previous years." (K8)

"As I write these lines, my biggest dream is for everything to return to normal, for the virus to be gone, and for everything to be wonderful again." (K1)

Career Goals and Personal Development: Students also discussed their dreams and aspirations beyond the pandemic:

"One of my biggest dreams right now is to work hard and become a professor. I hope I haven't given up on that dream and have even come a step closer to achieving it." (K2)

"Four years from now, I see myself walking out of the university gates, improved, successful, ready for my profession, and in love with my job. I want to guide my future students and make a difference in their lives." (K16)

In summary, the students' letters during the pandemic period revealed four key themes: the educational process, psychological effects, social life, and hopes for the future. The views expressed within these themes provide a nuanced and detailed account of students' experiences and expectations during this challenging time. Supported by direct quotations, this analysis offers valuable insight into how the pandemic affected students emotionally, socially, and academically.

What are the short- and long-term expectations of pre-service teachers?

Pre-service teachers frequently articulated their short- and long-term goals and expectations in their letters. These expectations generally revolved around personal development, professional success, the end of the pandemic, successful graduation, and having a positive impact on students. The following analysis presents these themes in detail, supported by student quotations.

1. Short-Term Goals and Expectations

Academic Success and Graduation: Pre-service teachers primarily focused on achieving academic success. Earning high grades, graduating with honours, and attaining academic accomplishments were common short-term objectives:

"First, I hope my grades are very high. Because I am working very hard for this right now, and I want to graduate with distinction." (K2)

"I hope I have graduated successfully with a high GPA, as a well-equipped teacher." (K1)

End of the Pandemic and Return to Normal: One of the most prominent short-term expectations was the desire for the pandemic to end and for educational life to return to normal. The return to face-to-face education and campus life was a recurring theme:

"I hope this pandemic ends soon both in our country and the world, and that we can complete our education face-to-face with our teachers and friends, just like in previous years." (K8)

"I hope in the coming years you are receiving education in person at school, and that the pandemic is over." (K5)

Personal Growth and Social Life Students also expressed aspirations to make the most of their university years by building friendships and being socially active:

"I will do my best to enjoy university life to the fullest so that I won't have regrets later." (K7)

"Just as I love myself now, I know I will love you four years from now. Be happy, love, be loved, teach, learn, and travel a lot. Your life will be different now. Welcome to your new life." (K14)

2. Long-Term Goals and Expectations

Professional Success and Career: Long-term aspirations focused on career development and professional achievements. Pre-service teachers expressed desires to become successful teachers, pursue academic careers, and make a meaningful difference in students' lives:

"One of my biggest dreams is to study hard and become a professor. I hope I haven't given up on that dream and have even come a step closer to achieving it." (K2)

"Four years from now, I see myself walking out of the university gates, improved, successful, ready for the profession, and in love with my job. I would love to guide my future students and make a difference in their lives." (K16)

Making a Positive Impact on Students: Pre-service teachers not only aimed to teach but also to instil values and positively influence their students' lives:

"Always teach your students the importance of family, love, respect, friendship, compassion, positivity, the value of every second, never giving up on dreams, and appreciating life." (K10)

"When we meet our students, we will teach them life and learn together. Our languages and cultures may be different, but our hearts will understand each other. I will be a guide to them, and they will be my companions." (K15)

Contribution to Society: Several pre-service teachers emphasised their desire to be beneficial individuals who contribute to the development of society:

"I hope I will be someone who is useful to my country." (K7)

"After four years, as I begin my profession, I want to help my country achieve a better future through the education I provide. I want to make my own contribution." (K12)

The short- and long-term goals of pre-service teachers are shaped around themes of academic and personal development, the end of the pandemic, professional success, and social contribution. These goals demonstrate that

even during the pandemic, students maintained hope and continued to pursue their dreams with determination. This analysis reveals that pre-service teachers, despite the challenges of the pandemic, kept their motivation high and clearly envisioned their path toward the future.

What Coping Strategies Did Pre-Service Teachers Use in Their Letters?

In their letters written during the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-service teachers shared how they coped with challenges and the strategies they adopted. These coping strategies were organised around several key themes, each supported by illustrative quotes from the participants:

1. Positive Thinking and Hope for the Future

Pre-service teachers emphasised the importance of maintaining hope and adopting a positive mindset as a way to cope with the difficulties of the pandemic. This approach helped them sustain motivation in times of uncertainty.

"I tried to stay as unaffected as possible by the negative conditions of the pandemic. Studying for days without leaving home was mentally exhausting. But my belief in better days ahead kept me from giving up." (K12)

2. Self-Kindness and Compassion

Many participants adopted self-compassion as a coping strategy, emphasising being kind and understanding toward themselves. This helped preserve their emotional well-being and made it easier to manage stress.

"Love yourself. You are very special and valuable. Never forget that." (K5)

3. Goal Setting and Determination

Students also maintained a strong sense of determination and remained focused on their goals. Despite the barriers, they continued to strive for self-improvement and progress.

"Never give up, Aleyna. You'll fall, make mistakes, and get things wrong—but those will make you stronger. I will always keep improving myself. I will never stop working." (K7)

4. Emotional Resilience and Inner Strength

Emotional strength and resilience were recurring themes in the letters. Students reflected on their ability to rise stronger after adversity and emphasised learning from failure.

"You have always been a strong person. Every time you fell, you got up even stronger. You know it will always be like that. Don't let anything wear you down. Learn from your mistakes." (K14)

5. Seeking Social Support

Maintaining communication with family and friends was an essential coping mechanism. Social support helped students feel emotionally grounded and connected.

"Throughout the pandemic, I stayed in constant contact with my family and friends. That support helped me get through the tough times." (K10)

6. Humour and Positive Perspective

Some students used humour and a lighthearted outlook to deal with stress. Humour helped them maintain morale and reduce emotional burden.

"Being able to laugh even during hard times and seeing things from a humorous perspective relaxes me. Humor has been my greatest savior during this time." (K8)

7. Self-Care and Personal Time

Self-care practices such as reading, walking, and engaging in hobbies were frequently mentioned. These activities helped students manage stress and maintain psychological well-being.

"During this period, I started giving myself more time. I read books, went on walks, and spent time on my hobbies. These activities really helped me mentally." (K11)

8. Meditation and Mindfulness

Some participants practised meditation and mindfulness to manage stress and maintain emotional balance. These strategies increased awareness and supported mental clarity.

"Starting my day with meditation gives me peace and helps me prepare for the challenges of the day." (K14)

Overall, the letters revealed that pre-service teachers adopted a wide range of coping strategies during the pandemic, including positive thinking, self-compassion, goal setting, emotional resilience, seeking social support, humour, self-care, and mindfulness. These strategies not only helped them navigate the pandemic more effectively but also represent valuable skills they can carry into their future professional lives as educators.

How did pre-service teachers conclude their letters?

The ways in which pre-service teachers concluded their letters were shaped around several recurring themes: personal advice, expectations for the future, self-compassion and motivational messages, direct conversations with their future selves, and hopes for the realisation of dreams and goals. Each theme is explored below, supported by sample quotations from the participants.

1. Personal Advice

Many pre-service teachers ended their letters with personal advice aimed at helping their future selves cope with challenges. These messages often reflected self-confidence and served as reminders to persevere:

"Note to S...: You have the power to achieve anything you want. A lot will change for you over these four years. Life is moving forward." (K3)

"Believe in yourself and succeed. Believing is half the battle. You will succeed and make everyone who believes in and loves you proud." (K11)

Ah A..., you're still so young. This is not the end, but rather the beginning. Read a lot. Travel the world and Turkey. Never give up on your character, values, or conscience. Be a successful woman. Keep learning and developing yourself in every way. Let go of unnecessary burdens. (K5)

2. Expectations for the Future

Some students expressed their hopes and aspirations for the future, often reflecting faith in their own success and the desire for a fulfilling life:

"I hope that by the time you read these lines, I will have achieved all this and made my family proud." (K1)

"When I read this letter four years from now, I hope everything is fine, I am happy and proud. I can't wait to see the joy and pride in my mother's eyes." (K11)

"If you are reading this letter now, I hope you are a happy, appointed teacher—or at least studying for the public service exam. Hopefully the first!" (K20)

3. Self-Compassion and Motivation

Self-directed compassion and motivational affirmations were common in the closing sections. These expressions reflect love, acceptance, and inner strength despite adversity:

"You're such a beautiful thing. Forever nineteen." (K4)

"Love yourself. You are special and valuable. Don't ever forget that." (K5)

"Ayşe Tüyan, I love you differently every year. Shape your beautiful destiny. Love yourself very, very much. Don't make yourself wait—read this as soon as possible." (K9)

"I don't know what you think of me now, but know that your twenty-year-old self loves you. May we have a beautiful life. See you in four years. Take care." (K13)

4. Conversations with Their Future Selves

Some participants concluded their letters by speaking directly to their future selves. These reflective messages expressed encouragement and acknowledgement of their efforts:

Yes, Esma of the future—you've reached the end of this journey, and if you're reading this at the end of four years, you've made it. Past Esma, who worked hard and even shed tears, is proud of you. I wish you success in your new life. (K21)

"If God wills, you'll be a great psychological counselor four years from now. Don't make yourself missed—write from time to time, Ayşe. Let's see where and with whom you're reading this letter." (K9)

5. Realisation of Goals and Dreams

Several letters closed with hopes that their goals would be fulfilled and that their dreams would become reality, revealing a forward-looking mindset and strong motivation:

"When I read this letter, I hope everything is in order, I am happy and proud. I can't wait to see the pride in my mother's eyes." (K11)

"When I read this letter four years from now, I hope all my dreams will have come true, and I will be shedding tears of joy while reading this page." (K7)

In conclusion, pre-service teachers closed their letters through expressions of personal advice, future expectations, self-compassion, motivational reflections, and dialogues with their future selves. These themes reveal a strong sense of self-belief, optimism, and emotional resilience. The final sections of the letters reflect the participants' inner motivation, belief in their goals, and ability to maintain hope in the face of challenges. This analysis offers meaningful insight into their future orientation and enduring self-confidence.

5. Discussion

In this study, pre-service teachers began their letters by greeting and introducing themselves, then proceeded to reflect on the effects of the pandemic on the educational process. They discussed both the challenges and opportunities the pandemic presented. Findings show that pre-service teachers' remote learning experiences during the pandemic were largely characterised by inefficiency, lack of motivation, loneliness, and technical difficulties. These results align directly with Özüdoğru's (2021) and Tarık Önal and Önal's findings on the emergency remote teaching process, which highlight students' dissatisfaction due to lengthy online classes, limited interaction, and insufficient technological resources. In addition, the inadequacy of pedagogical solutions, the lack of practical training, and emotional and social isolation contributed to the perception of online education as highly challenging. Similarly, Şensoy Murat and Erdur Baker (2023) emphasise that although teacher candidates faced significant uncertainty, disorientation, and technical difficulties during the pandemic, this period also created opportunities for pedagogical flexibility and professional identity development.

The findings of this study reveal that pre-service teachers who began their university education during the pandemic experienced a multifaceted transformation encompassing emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions. Despite the challenges, participants demonstrated adaptation and growth both personally and professionally. This aligns with the perspective that resilience is not an innate trait but a process that can be learned and developed (Basım & Çetin, 2011; Gürkan, 2006). Resilience represents an adaptive capacity that enables individuals to maintain functionality under stress or trauma, in which personal strengths, social support, and proactive coping behaviours play a crucial role (Gürkan, 2006).

In the present study, teacher candidates similarly stated that the pandemic transformed their understanding of education and equipped them to cope with difficult conditions, thereby enhancing their resilience. This finding corresponds with the concept of pedagogical resilience noted in the literature, which refers to the ability of learners to persist in the learning process despite challenging circumstances (Zara et al., 2022).

In their letters, the pre-service teachers also discussed the psychological impacts of the pandemic and the coping strategies they adopted. Commonly reported emotional challenges included loneliness, social isolation, stress, and a loss of motivation. At the same time, they described coping mechanisms such as self-compassion, positive thinking, and goal setting. Expressions such as "love yourself," "be patient," and "don't give up," which frequently appeared in the letters, indicate that self-compassion functioned as a strong internal coping strategy during the pandemic. Self-compassion involves developing a nonjudgmental, understanding, and kind attitude toward oneself and perceiving personal shortcomings as part of shared human experience (Neff, 2003). Its three fundamental components—self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness—help individuals strengthen emotional awareness and self-regulation. Neff and Germer (2017) demonstrated that self-compassion reduces depression and anxiety while enhancing psychological well-being. In this context, the participants' reflections on self-forgiveness, hope, and acceptance represent evidence of self-compassion-based emotional regulation.

The findings further indicate that self-compassion was not only an inner attitude but also a learnable skill. Beaumont (2016) argues that self-compassion can be taught and that its integration into educational programs enhances students' psychological resilience.

Furthermore, participants effectively utilised emotional strategies such as humour and maintaining a positive outlook as coping tools. Pandemic conditions required pre-service teachers to cope with feelings of loneliness, stress, and lack of motivation. However, findings showed that they adopted strategies such as humour, optimism, goal setting, and social support to manage these challenges. Prior research supports that resilience is closely related to cognitive flexibility and emotion regulation processes (Basım & Çetin, 2011). Statements such as "everything will pass" and "keep smiling" suggest the participants' ability to reframe negative experiences. According to Gürkan (2006), resilience is a dynamic process that enables effective stress management, in which self-efficacy and hope serve as protective factors.

The articulation of short- and long-term goals emerged as another prominent theme in the letters. Short-term goals were typically related to academic success, achieving high grades, returning to face-to-face learning, and focusing on personal growth. Long-term goals included professional achievements (e.g., becoming a professor or a good teacher), making a difference in students' lives, contributing to society, and generating social value. These aspirations align with professional identity formation, the development of a career vision, and a growing sense of social responsibility—all of which the literature suggests became more deeply ingrained during the pandemic.

The pandemic deepened pre-service teachers' commitment to the profession and shaped their professional identities toward a sense of "becoming a real teacher." This transformation is evident in the students' expressions, such as "I want to guide my students" or "I want to be useful to society." Zara et al. (2022) also found that candidates developed

not only pedagogical competence but also self-awareness and emotional connectedness, indicating a more conscious construction of their professional selves.

The findings of this study indicate that pre-service teachers perceived the difficulties they encountered during the pandemic not solely as crises but as opportunities for personal and professional growth. Internal and external resources such as self-compassion, mindfulness, and social support enhanced their emotional resilience (Neff, 2003; Neff & Germer, 2017). Furthermore, family bonds and communal connectedness within the cultural context sustained this resilience (Gürkan, 2006).

Based on these results, it is recommended that teacher education programs incorporate psychoeducational interventions focusing on self-compassion, emotion regulation, and resilience (Beaumont, 2016). Such interventions can help future teachers develop emotionally robust and self-aware professional identities. Ultimately, resilience and self-compassion should be considered not only as tools for crisis management but also as foundational competencies for sustaining long-term professional well-being among teachers.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the experiences, emotions, and expectations of pre-service teachers who began university during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pre-service teachers' COVID-19 pandemic journey, as conceptualised and presented in Figure 1, was based on their letters.

Figure 1

From disruption to resilience: A conceptual model of pre-service teachers' reflection

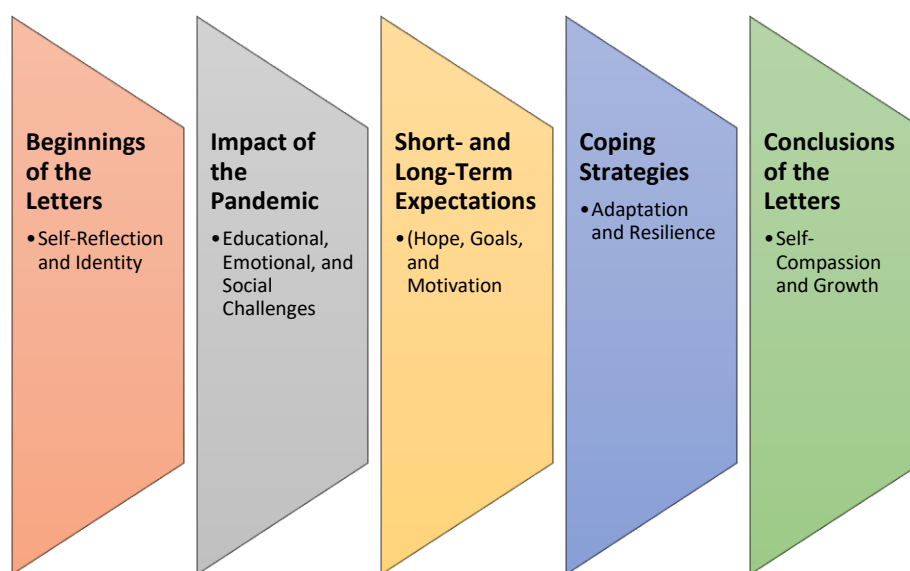


Figure 1 illustrates the thematic flow of pre-service teachers' reflections during the COVID-19 pandemic. The letters begin with self-reflective narratives and progress through the description of pandemic-related challenges. These experiences shape the students' evolving expectations and future orientations, which, in turn, trigger the development of coping strategies and emotional resilience. The process culminates in a sense of self-compassion, personal growth, and hope for the future. This sequential model represents a developmental transformation from disruption to adaptation and ultimately resilience, reflecting how pre-service teachers constructed meaning and identity amid crisis.

Pre-service teachers' COVID-19 pandemic journey was also written as a letter and given in Appendix A.

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. **Impact of the Pandemic on Education:** The pandemic caused significant disruptions and challenges in pre-service teachers' educational processes. Remote learning negatively affected students' motivation and reduced their academic productivity. However, this period also provided opportunities for students to develop self-directed learning and self-regulation skills.

2. **Psychological Effects and Coping Strategies:** The pandemic heightened feelings of stress, loneliness, and uncertainty among students. To cope with these challenges, pre-service teachers adopted a variety of strategies. Self-compassion, positive thinking, seeking social support, and goal setting were among the key coping mechanisms that fostered their emotional resilience and facilitated adversity management.
3. **Future Expectations and Motivation:** Students expressed strong expectations for the end of the pandemic and a return to traditional educational routines. Their long-term goals, including achieving professional success, making a positive impact on students, and contributing to society, sustained their motivation during the crisis.
4. **Personal Growth and Academic Achievement:** Pre-service teachers were determined to make the most of their university years and continue their personal development. Achieving academic success and graduating with strong credentials were among their primary short-term goals. The challenges they faced during the pandemic reinforced their perseverance and determination.
5. **Self-Compassionate Resilience:** The recurring themes of self-compassionate resilience in the letters played a crucial role in motivating students and strengthening their capacity to cope with hardship. They demonstrated the ability to be kind to themselves and foster emotional endurance.

These conclusions offer valuable insights into the lived experiences and coping strategies of pre-service teachers during the pandemic. Furthermore, the findings have important implications for shaping future education policies in times of crisis. Establishing support mechanisms that address students' emotional and academic needs will contribute to more effective, resilient learning environments.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. To improve the efficiency of remote education during crises such as pandemics, more interactive, student-centred, and technologically supported instructional designs should be developed. Guidance programs should be offered to equip pre-service teachers with effective online learning strategies.
2. To help students cope with stress, loneliness, and uncertainty, universities should expand access to psychological counselling and guidance services. Workshops and seminars focusing on self-compassion and emotional resilience should be integrated into student support systems.
3. To reinforce students' professional motivation, mentoring programs that emphasise the meaning and impact of the teaching profession should be designed. Opportunities should be created for students to engage with professional role models in the field of education.
4. Educational institutions should prepare flexible and sustainable learning scenarios for extraordinary situations. Future educational policies should be grounded in principles of crisis management, student well-being, and digital inclusion.
5. Teacher education programs should integrate content that supports self-compassion, self-awareness, and resilience. Strengthening these competencies will not only benefit candidates during their student years but also enhance their emotional endurance in future teaching roles.
6. Documenting the lived experiences of students during the pandemic and linking these to educational outcomes will provide valuable data for long-term policy and practice. Similar studies should be replicated across different student groups and educational contexts to broaden the understanding of these dynamics.

8. Contribution Declaration / Katkı Oranı Beyanı

Single author

9. Conflict of Interest / Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı

No conflict of interest

10. Supporter and Grant Declaration (If exists) / Destek ve Teşekkür Beyanı (Eğer varsa)

No grant

References

- Basım, H. N., & Cetin, F. (2011). The reliability and validity of the Resilience Scale for Adults-Turkish version. *Turkish Journal of Psychiatry*, 22(2), 104–114.
- Beaumont, E. (2016). *Building resilience by cultivating compassion. Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal*, 27(4), 22–27.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Çelik, H. (2017). Öğretmen adaylarının psikolojik dayanıklılıkları ile umutsuzluk düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkinin incelenmesi. *Milli Eğitim Dergisi*, 216, 389–408.
- Demirbaş, N. (2010). *Yaşamda anlam ve yılmazlık* [Master's thesis, Hacettepe University]. Hacettepe University.
- Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., Tigelaar, E. H., van Rijswijk, M. M., & Jansen, E. P. W. A. (2024). Preservice teachers' resilience during times of COVID-19. *Teachers and Teaching*, 30(7–8), 1083–1096. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2023.2172391>
- Gürkan, U. (2006). Development of the Resilience Scale (RS): Reliability and validity studies. Ankara University *Journal of Faculty of Educational Sciences*, 39(2), 45–74.
- Güngör, S. (2017). Öğretmen adaylarının psikolojik dayanıklılık düzeylerinin bazı değişkenler açısından incelenmesi. *OPUS Uluslararası Toplum Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 7(13), 746–761. <https://doi.org/10.26466/opus.405751>
- Hoşoğlu, R., Fıncı Kodaz, A., Yılmaz Bingöl, T., & Vural Batık, M. (2018). Öğretmen adaylarında psikolojik sağlamlık. *OPUS – Uluslararası Toplum Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 8(14), 217–239. <https://doi.org/10.26466/opus.405751>
- Jin, M. (2023). Preservice teachers' online teaching experiences during COVID-19, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 51(4), 371–381. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01316-3>
- Li, K., Degotardi, S., & Li, H. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of preservice teacher education: A scoping review. *Asia Pacific Education Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-022-09816-y>
- Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860390129863>
- Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2017). Self-compassion and psychological well-being. In J. Doty (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of compassion science* (pp. 371–386). Oxford University Press.
- Özüdoğru, F. (2021). Turisih preservice teachers' experiences with emergency remote teaching: A phneomenological study, *Issues in Educational Research*, 31(1), 166–187. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier31/ozudogru.pdf>.
- Shange, F., & de Jager, S. (2024). Student teachers' resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic: Navigating remote teaching practice. *Research in Social Sciences and Technology*, 9(3), 340–350. <https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2024.63>
- Şensoy Murt, G., & Erdur-Baker, Ö. (2023). Career-related concerns and opportunities in the times of COVID-19 pandemic among preservice teachers. *European Journal of Teacher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2023.2296351>
- Tanık Önal, N., & Önal, N. (2023). Online learning and teaching experiences of preservice science teachers during Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Educational Technology & Online Learning*, 6(2), 295–314. <https://doi.org/10.31681/jetol.1078486>
- Taşdemir, S. H., & Murat, M. (2021). Öğretmen adaylarının bilişsel esneklikleri ile yılmazlık düzeyleri arasındaki ilişkide bilişsel duygu düzenleme stratejilerinin aracı rolü. *İnönü Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi*, 22(3), 2188–2209. <https://doi.org/10.17679/inuefd.1005419>
- Yaşar, M. Ö., & Atay, D. (2023). Evaluating learner autonomy during the COVID-19: An examination of student teachers' self-directed learning readiness for MOOCs. *Anatolian Journal of Education*, 8(1), 29–46. <https://doi.org/10.29333/aje.2023.813a>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Zara, C. G., Balazon, F., Wangdi, T., Perales, W. F., Praditson, P., & Ulla, M. B. (2022). Exploring the concept of pedagogical resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic: Teachers' perspectives from Thailand and the Philippines. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, 981217. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.981217>
- Zümbül, S. (2019). Öğretmen adaylarının psikolojik iyi oluş düzeylerinde bilinçli farkındalık ve affetmenin yordayıcı rolleri. *Ege Eğitim Dergisi*, 20(1), 20–36. <https://doi.org/10.12984/egcefd.481963>

Appendix A.**Dear Future Self,**

When I look back at the letters we wrote during the early days of the pandemic, I see how uncertainty once defined our world. We began with self-addressed words — greetings filled with curiosity and cautious hope. Those early lines were not just simple openings; they were acts of self-recognition. By introducing ourselves and recalling our first days at the university, we were shaping our identities as both learners and future educators.

As days blurred into months, the pandemic reshaped our sense of normality. The educational process shifted from classrooms to screens, forcing us to adapt to new modes of learning. Yet, what changed most was not only the setting but also our emotional landscape. Feelings of isolation, fatigue, and disconnection began to occupy our minds. Our social lives shrank, and the excitement of being a university student was replaced by the monotony of digital existence. Still, within these struggles, faint sparks of hope began to emerge — hope that someday, face-to-face laughter, lessons, and friendship would return.

Gradually, our reflections evolved into visions of the future. We began to set both short- and long-term goals — to graduate successfully, to teach meaningfully, and to contribute to a better society. These aspirations gave us direction in a time of chaos. They reminded us that even in crisis, we could define purpose.

To sustain that purpose, we learned to cope. Some of us practiced optimism, some turned to family or faith, and others found resilience in humor and self-kindness. These strategies were not merely survival mechanisms; they were lessons in becoming emotionally adaptive individuals. They revealed that resilience is not an inborn trait but a skill developed through reflection, compassion, and persistence.

As our letters concluded, a different tone emerged — one of acceptance, gratitude, and growth. We spoke gently to our future selves, offering advice and encouragement. We learned to be patient, to forgive ourselves, and to celebrate small victories. The act of writing became a bridge between our past struggles and future possibilities.

Looking back, I now understand that what began as a disruption transformed into an education of the self. Through reflection, vulnerability, and hope, we moved from crisis to resilience — and in that journey, we became not only better teachers but also stronger, more self-aware human beings.

**With hope,
Your Past Self**