

The COVID-19 pandemic and health literacy skills as part of adult and continuing education: Perspectives from Turkey

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Abstract

With the COVID-19 pandemic, adult learning and education has turned toward the field of health. Group behavior is as effective as individual attitudes and skills in coping with the pandemic and slowing the spread of the disease. In this process, adults' health literacy skills are vital in their strategies to cope with the pandemic. This paper is aimed to examine the learning needs of adults that have emerged with the pandemic from the perspective of Turkey. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the key role of education as part of lifelong learning, in the context of adult health literacy skills and managing disaster processes.

KEYWORDS

adult education, adult learning, COVID-19, health literacy, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of adult learning is that it is need-oriented and that the subject to be learned should help solve problems in adults' lives (Knowles et al., 2012). In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has directed the learning needs of adults to the field of health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2017), health literacy is one of the three pillars of health promotion and it should be an integral part of lifelong learning skills. Yilmazel and Çetinkaya (2016), sharing the information that the health literacy levels of countries are low at varying rates, emphasize the importance of adult education. On the other hand, in a study measuring coronavirus-related health literacy skills levels in Germany, it was found that 50.1% of adults were "problematic" or "inadequate" and "confusion about coronavirus information was significantly higher among those who had lower health literacy" (Okan et al., 2020). Although the researches in the literature on health literacy are mostly in the medical field, the development of adults' health literacy skills through education is related to adult education.

According to the Third Global Report on Adult Learning and Education, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2016), education provides health benefits (better health outcomes, longer life, lower health costs, for example) for both individuals and society as a whole. Highlighting the impact of adult education on health, Lopes (2018) states that "citizens educated in health literacy tend to adopt healthier lifestyles, enjoy better mental health, and engage in fewer risky behavior." He also stresses that "another aspect of the relationship between health and adult education stems from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)". Accordingly, as a part of lifelong learning, it is necessary to examine the health literacy skills of adults in terms of adult education and to develop solutions on what can be done. This paper is aimed to examine the learning needs of adults that have emerged with the pandemic from the perspective of Turkey. For this purpose, first, the issue of health literacy of adults will be evaluated in outline, and then the problem areas and solution proposals related to the pandemic will be discussed in the axis of adult learning and education.

The COVID-19 disease caused by the coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019, spread with the transportation facilities of today's world and turned into a pandemic. Although the pandemic is a situation in the field of health, it has affected many areas such as economy, food, climate, and education besides health and its effects continue. It is stated by epidemiologists and public health specialists that the coronavirus is a family of viruses that the world has faced since the early 2000s and is an expected virus. Despite the warnings of scientists of a possible pandemic, the preparedness of many countries against the pandemic has become questionable in this process.

It was observed that group behaviors as well as individual attitudes and skills were effective in coping with the disease and slowing down its spread rate during the pandemic process. Public health specialists draw attention to two factors in outbreak management. While the first of these is the nature and effectiveness of the public measures taken, the second is the citizens' attitude and epidemic approach in the successful execution of the epidemic process (Saltık, 2020). The second factor highlights the field of health literacy as part of adult education and lifelong learning.

Adults and health literacy

Health literacy has a wide scope from understanding and evaluating the health-related information of individuals, applying the treatment given to them, to the correct use of drugs, knowing how to benefit from health services, understanding and signing health-related forms (Çopurlar & Kartal, 2016; Sezgin, 2013; Yılmaz & Tiraki, 2016). Acquisition of the skills and attitudes in this definition is possible with effective and widely adult education activities and programs.

Studies have revealed a relationship between low health literacy and poor health outcomes. "It has been determined that the health literacy scores of patients with low education level, low income, poor/very poor health and high risk are lower" (Uğurlu & Akgün, 2019, p. 96). Literacy is another key factor that determines the level of health literacy. "Health literacy is itself dependent upon more general levels of literacy. Poor literacy can affect people's health directly by limiting their personal, social and cultural development, as well as hindering the development of health literacy" (Murthy, 2009). Accordingly, it is concluded that literacy skills of adults and their health literacy skills are closely related.

Adult education activities targeting health literacy can contribute to improved health status. In a study conducted in Australia, a standard adult education program including language, literacy, and mathematics was compared with an adult education-based health literacy program in addition to this education. As a result of the research, it was found that participants in the health literacy program achieved higher health literacy, more confidence, and more health knowledge scores over the 6-month program period (McCaffery et al., 2019).

The Turkish Medical Association (TMA, 2020a) shared the "6th Month Assessment Report of COVID-19 Pandemic" with the public regarding the course of the disease. In the report, the Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat (SWOT) analysis of Turkey's fight against the pandemic, health literacy is among the weaknesses and report stated that health literacy is an area that needs to be developed rapidly as a society and it is one of the most important problems of the country in the field of health. The report also was included the findings of a survey conducted on Health Literacy Level in Turkey, by the Ministry of Health General Directorate of Health Promotion (2019). Accordingly, it has been revealed that seven out of 10 citizens have insufficient or limited levels of health literacy (TMA, 2020a).

The pandemic: A new area for learning

In the days following the pandemic announcement of the WHO, education was suspended in many countries and in some sectors, home-based working system was adopted. These decisions were followed by quarantine practices and measures of health authorities. It has been observed that in the first months of the pandemic, people mostly implemented pandemic measures. In this process, in addition to the statements of official authorities, information on prevention from disease was shared through communication channels. By June, countries started to gradually lift pandemic bans.

During the pandemic period, two main topics that emerged in the field of adult education and learning in Turkey are the learning needs of adults about the pandemic and its effects, and the informal learning experiences of adults in this process. Regarding COVID-19, which necessitates new learning for adults, Ministry of Health (2020) has published a 14-point public service announcement (PSA) to inform all citizens about ways to protect

them from the virus; and published different PSA, posters, brochures, social media videos and videos by specialists about the disease in the process. The TMA (2020b) has established a COVID-19 Working Group and continued to inform the public with reports, books, webinar, journal and podcast publications, as well as videos on disease-related measures for healthcare professionals and the public. On the other hand, while the pandemic and its effects were the main issue in the media, the opinions and suggestions of the specialists in the field of medicine regarding the disease were frequently featured in the visual and printed media. Second, as a result of the pandemic and related quarantine measures, new learning areas such as developing new technological skills and experiencing working from home have emerged for adults (Dilmen, 2020). From work at home to teleshopping, these learning, which mostly take place through individual effort and informal ways, were mandatory learning areas for adults in this process. In summary, the pandemic period, on the one hand, required new health-related learning for adults, and on the other hand, new practices in social and working life also revealed new areas of learning.

According to the report of TMA (2020a), the epidemic curve in Turkey reached its peak after sixth week, and begin to fall, while the number of new cases increased again in the 14th week and after. The report states that the main reason for this is the uncontrolled “reopening” process called “normalization” that started as of June 1. Accordingly, despite the expectation that the epidemic would slow down due to the summer season after June 1, the daily number of cases could not fall to the desired and expected number due to the “loosening of physical distance and other protection measures.”

As a result, although it is desirable to return to the daily life in the summer months, the pandemic seems to be on the rise again with the autumn, as predicted by the health authorities. The TMA (2020a) states that the official case and death numbers shared with the public cause some of the public not to believe in the pandemic or the danger of the disease. Therefore, TMA adds that some citizens lack of solidarity in the fight against the pandemic, while others do not follow the rules of masks, physical distance and personal hygiene. All this reveals the importance of adult learning and education in emergency situations such as a pandemic.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pandemic process has shown that adults’ health literacy levels are important in coping with the disease. In the light of the physicians’ evaluation report and all research, the role of adult education emerges as to expand health literacy skills to cover all segments of the society. There are adults who do not comply as well as adults who comply with pandemic measures such as masks, physical distance, personal hygiene and avoidance of crowds. It is possible for each individual to comply with the rules and act consciously in order to protect himself and others, with the skill of health literacy.

The first and necessary step to be taken on the health literacy skills of adults is to organize effective and informative training on the COVID-19 pandemic. These trainings should be spread to the whole society, starting with those working in the critical sectors (grocery store clerk, deliveryman, security forces, educators, people working in the transit system etc.), prioritizing the disadvantaged groups as social position in the rest of the population. Low literacy and relatively poor people were more affected by the pandemic process (TMA, 2020c). Therefore, adult education-based health literacy education, primarily for disadvantaged groups, comes to the forefront as an educational field in the context of the pandemic.

Second, the reasons why adults do not comply with pandemic measures should be investigated with sociological and psychological dimensions. Health literacy education of adults should be structured in the light of the data obtained from these studies. In the context of lifelong learning, ways of using media and social media tools effectively to increase health literacy skills can be explored. Bagherpour and Nouri (2020), pointing out to the deadly dimension of misinformation, recommend that social media companies in cooperation with governments, eliminate misinformation about COVID-19 before it becomes public.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that education plays a key role in adults’ knowledge and skills in health literacy as part of lifelong learning. Based on the discourse that the world will not be the same after the pandemic and medical experts foresee that there will be other pandemics, it is necessary to restructure adult education programs in accordance with the postpandemic world. In addition to health literacy training for adults, it is seen that there is a need for programs that question the causes of the pandemic and include issues such as the use of resources, climate change and nature. The humanist foundations of adult education will guide the development of programs that will help adults learn in collaboration. Finally, adult education and learning should be included in the national action plans of countries for possible disasters.

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