Investigating distance education experiences of social studies teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic period: A phenomenological analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate how social studies teachers were engaged in distance education and training activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed phenomenology design under qualitative research methods. The participants were selected using criterion sampling under purposive sampling methods and included 15 social studies teachers (9 males and 6 females) working in Mamak and Sincan districts of Ankara in the 2021-2022 academic year. Data were gathered via a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher based on the relevant literature and expert opinions. The data were analyzed via content analysis. The results revealed that the technological problems had an important place among the experiences of the teachers and that the most important reason for students' inability to access distance education activities was their low socio-economic level.

Keywords: Social studies teacher, COVID-19 pandemic, distance education, phenomenology

1. Introduction

1.1. Emergence and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

In the city of Wuhan, China, towards the end of 2019, a pneumonia-type pandemic of unknown origin emerged. This virus, whose contagiousness is at the highest level in the world so far, has spread all over the world in a very short time. After a while, this virus was expressed as COVID-19 from the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome)-Cov2 group (Cheng, 2020; Koury & Hirschhaut, 2020). The current pandemic caused by the worldwide spread of COVID-19 has been described as an unprecedented global crisis (Hall et al, 2020). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as an international pandemic. Almost all countries in the world have taken some measures from

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the first moment the virus appeared to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Among these measures, the most effective and most applied was a quarantine period that isolated people at home in order to keep the spread of the pandemic under control (Koury & Hirschhaut, 2020).

COVID-19, which affected the whole world immediately after its emergence in the Far East, caused serious disruptions in almost all sectors. One of the sectors where these disruptions and changes are experienced is education (Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson, & Hanson, 2020, Çalık & Altay, 2021). With the declaration of this crisis as a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March, many countries in the world had to take a break from education due to COVID-19 in the same month. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest education disruption in history and its effects have reached a global scale. By mid-April 2020, 1.6 billion students worldwide, from pre-school to tertiary education, were affected by the pandemic. In this period, the courses were moved to online environments at almost all stages of the education-teaching period in the world and it was decided to continue the rest of the academic year in this way (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020; Jinyoung, 2020).

Due to the pandemic, the disruptions in education, as in all areas, were not a first in the world. There have been some pandemics where similar periods have occurred in the past. For example, SARS (SARS-CoV) had a negative impact on the educational activities of many countries around the world. In addition, the H1N1 pandemic, known as swine flu, prevented the effective continuation of educational activities in 2009, although not all over the world. Similarly, during the COVID-19 period, distance education was seen as an alternative to face-to-face education, and lessons were held in this way (Kaur, 2020).

As of March 11, 2020, when the first COVID-19 case was seen in Turkey, all institutions and organizations in Turkey, as well as in the whole world, took action by creating various measures and action plans in their areas. One of the important decisions regarding education and training activities was the decision announced on March 12, 2020. In this decision, it was stated that face-to-face education activities would be suspended in a two-week period from March 16 to March 30. In the first week of this two-week break period, it was recommended by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) that students spend their time resting at home. After this week, it has been announced that students will continue their education periods from their homes. In this period, it was stated that students should continue their education over the internet through the channels to be opened by the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) and the Education Information Network (EBA) system. It was stated that education and training activities will continue in digital environments due to the continuous increase in the number of cases in the future. Then, it was announced that the rest of the spring semester would be completed in this way as the spread of the virus could not be brought under control. For the 2020-2021 academic year, however, it was initially started as a distance education period, and after a while, face-to-face education was switched from time to time only in pre-school education institutions and different levels of primary school, but due to

fluctuations in virus cases, distance education was returned and the term ended in this way. As a result of the positive results of the vaccine studies developed against COVID-19 and the increase in the number and rates of vaccination, face-to-face training was started in the spring term of the 2021-2022 academic year.

1. 2. A conceptual glance at distance education and the COVID-19 period

Distance or virtual education is a period from the nineteenth century and its development occurs in the middle of the twentieth century. Distance education was originally designed to appeal to students who live far from the university campus. With the development of the postal service in the 19th century, colleges began offering distance education to students in the United States by letter. This rapid change in mass media has changed the face of distance education applications, and depending on the technological developments in the following years, the arguments used by distance education have developed and diversified. After a while, distance education started to be discussed as an educational approach that could replace traditional face-to-face classrooms through electronic communication (Robert, 1996).

Köksal (2020) emphasizes that distance education has grown significantly in the last ten years with the combination of the internet and education to provide people with the opportunity to gain new skills. Online learning not only represents an innovative approach to streamline the educational period but also creates new opportunities for global markets. Distance education, also known as electronic learning (E-learning), has been defined in various ways in the relevant literature according to the context in which it is used. As in the classification for the education paradigm, it is also stated that distance education (Sangrà, Vlachopoulos & Cabrera, 2012) is an educational period that uses information and communication technologies to mediate synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning activities (Jereb & Šmitek, 2006). Picon (2020), on the other hand, defines distance education as a digital environment in which teachers and students are the leading actors of the teaching-learning period, discuss, interact, analyze, and explore various topics in synchronous or asynchronous classrooms in this virtual space.

Distance education is a form of education that provides learning experiences for both students and adults who are unable to access education from distant places or go to a school for various reasons. Online learning experiences through distance education can be asynchronous or synchronous. Asynchronous learning is a period where students can participate in learning through different media tools such as e-mail or discussion boards. Students can also communicate and complete activities at their own chosen time and learn at their own pace. In contrast, simultaneous learning activities take place via live video and/or audio conferencing with immediate feedback (Hrastinski, 2008). On the other hand, e-learning tools can play a very important role in epidemic and disaster periods. It can be said to be an important element in helping educators, schools and universities facilitate

students' learning during periods when universities and schools are closed. Most of these systems also provide free service (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh & Althunibat, 2020).

The importance of distance education is undeniable in helping students continue to learn after the disruption of education periods after epidemics or disasters caused by the closure of schools. Distance education is considered important due to many other reasons that prevent face-to-face participation in classes, as well as problems related to geographical distance (Singh & Thurman, 2019; Yılmaz, 2019). It is possible to find examples of activities carried out in the form of distance education in our recent past as well as today. For example, during the SARS virus epidemic in Hong Kong in 2003, classes were interrupted and lessons were held online through distance education. Although most academics were familiar with online teaching platforms before the SARS crisis, this new situation also allowed them to explore how to use the seemingly more complex functions of distance education (such as setting up online exams). Baytiyeh (2018) emphasized the importance of digital technologies in supporting the continuity of education during short-term school closures after the earthquake.

With the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in many countries of the world were closed and education activities had to be interrupted. The closure of these schools has led to action to ensure continuity of learning and to prevent learning losses by using distance learning tools and opportunities (TEDMEM, 2020a). Although the live transmission of the lectures was made through TV channels, both public and private schools and universities have received the support of large companies such as Microsoft, Google, Zoom in this difficult period. Apart from these programs, universities have used other applications under different names. For example, Microsoft Teams announced that its online video conferencing software would be free for six months and made it available to people. Likewise, Zoom has removed the time limit for video calls (Rani Molla, 2020). Some of the popular applications used in this period are given below (Quihan, Afzaal, Alaudan, & Younas, 2020):

Table 1. *Use of online apps during the COVID-19*

Online Education Apps		
Zoom	GoToMeeting	Google Classroom
Canvas	Skype	Funbrain
WhatsApp	Edu.google.com	Whyville.net
Vedamo	Youtube	Edmodo
Khanacademy	Blackboard	Schoology
TED-Ed	Udemy	Classdojo
Codeacademy	Coursera	Google hangouts
Stanford Online	Instagram	Facebook

Undoubtedly, like many other aspects of daily life, COVID-19 has had a very serious impact on students, educators, and educational institutions worldwide (Mailizar, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020; Toquero, 2020). This period was initially painful all over the world, including developed countries. The smooth transition from traditional education to virtual and distance learning could not be expected to happen overnight (Crawford et al., 2020). In this sense, the problems experienced all over the world were also experienced in Turkey at the

beginning. When the data related to this period in Turkey are examined, very serious problems and uncertainties have been witnessed. At the beginning of this period, most of the students did not or could not enter EBA. It is not known whether they have access to EBA TV, to what extent EBA TV is watched by students, to what extent the content offered on EBA TV can support learning, how students continue their learning, and to what extent they receive learning support from their parents (TEDMEM, 2020b).

1. 3. Distance education and the role of teacher

Since the beginning of the pandemic, teachers have been tasked with implementing distance education methods very quickly without adequate guidance, training, or resources being provided to them. In this period, web-based classroom meetings and messaging applications have become a way of communicating between students and teachers. On the one hand, studies demonstrate that the most basic duty of teachers in online lessons during the pandemic period is to prevent learning losses as much as possible by increasing the learning motivation of students (Villafuerte, Bello, Pantaleón, & Bermello, 2020). On the other hand, some other research has revealed that teachers could not sufficiently benefit from strategies and methods suitable for online teaching (Ren, 2020). It is therefore logical to argue that teachers are relatively unprepared for the period and that they do not have sufficient knowledge and skills about effective online teaching (Duff & Kent, 2020).

One of the most important factors in maintaining a more functional and effective teaching period in the transition from face-to-face education to online environments is teachers' attitudes towards digital technologies and their level of readiness. Especially since students with low socioeconomic status have limited computer technology skills, teachers have more work to do. In a study conducted in EU countries (except for Slovenia, France, Croatia, Hungary, and Belgium), it was emphasized that measures should be taken to increase the computer technology skills of teachers in classrooms where students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are concentrated (Di Pietro, Biagi, Dinis Mota Da Costa, Karpinski, & Mazza, 2020).

It is possible to say that teachers are the most important actor in this period because of their responsibilities such as developing alternative approaches to monitor and contribute to student learning (from the assessment period to eliminating learning losses). This occupies a much more important place, particularly in disadvantaged student relations, where families can provide limited support to their children. Teachers also have to learn about how to adapt their students to this new period while taking into account the situation that they can only communicate online to help their students not to lose their learning motivation. Here, we come across the necessity of improving the digital competencies of teachers of all ages. Bringing these competencies to teachers is also considered very

important with workshops and training courses to be organized by policymakers (Redecker, 2017).

The transition from face-to-face instruction to online education has a serious impact on measurement and evaluation periods. Although technology has been included in the educational periods in many ways to support teaching and learning, the evaluation aspect of online courses has not been developed enough (Timmis, Broadfoot, Sutherland, & Oldfield, 2016). Adapting courses and exams designed for face-to-face learning to online assessment is a challenging period. Both students and teachers do not have much experience with the online assessment procedure (Kearns, 2012). In this sense, policymakers need to adjust the types and periods of evaluation in this period to suit online education. However, when the relevant literature is examined, it is striking that the research on examining the experiences of social studies teachers in the context of distance education is scarce (Akgül & Oran, 2020; Osmanoğlu, 2020; Uyar, 2020). Addressing this shortcoming in the literature, the purpose of this study is to investigate how social studies teachers were engaged in distance education and training activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, we aim to answer the research questions below:

1. What did you experience as a social studies teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What were the reflections of your experiences on classroom instruction and the teaching profession?

Our findings could offer important information for practitioners and policymakers in terms of developing effective distance education practices that might better serve students' learning needs. Also, we believe that our findings could provide an important reference point for further research.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

The study adopted phenomenological design under qualitative research methods. Phenomenological research examines the essence of individuals' experiences with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In some studies, it is pointed out that phenomenology originates from the Greek word phenomenon and phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). It is also stated that it is widely used in research originating from sociology, psychology, health sciences, and education. The available literature debates several perspectives regarding research such as interpretive, existential, and transcendental (Giorgi, 2009). This study adopted the "descriptive transcendental phenomenology." as it attempted to investigate the experiences of social studies teachers

regarding distance education applications during the pandemic period and the common points in these experiences.

2.2. Participants

The participants of the study included 15 social studies teachers (9 males and 6 females) working in Mamak and Sincan districts of Ankara in the 2021-2022 academic year. They were selected via criterion sampling under purposive sampling methods (Creswell, 2013). The criterion for inclusion in this study was that the participants were working as social studies teachers in schools affiliated with MoNE and had teaching experience via distance education during the pandemic period.

2.3. Data collection

The data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher based on the relevant literature and expert opinions. In order to obtain more in-depth data from the participants, complementary questions were utilized (Glesne, 2012). The interview form was carried out in two stages. At the first stage, opinions were received from two faculty members working in the field of assessment and evaluation and social studies education. These views were taken into consideration when developing the form. In the second stage, the views of a faculty member working in the field of Turkish Education were consulted to examine the form in terms of language and meaning. The fact that the author had previously worked as a teacher and school administrator in educational institutions affiliated with MoNE was a factor that facilitated the data collection period. In this context, the researcher made a preliminary interview with the participants who met the criteria mentioned above, and some information about the study was presented.

Table 2. The interview schedule

Code title	Interview number	Interview date	Interview time	Interview venue	Interview period
M1	1	10/09/2021	14:25	An empty classroom	13.32 mins.
F2	2	14/09/2021	10:12	An empty classroom	8.02 mins.
F3	3	14/09/2021	10:25	An empty classroom	13.45 mins.
M4	4	14/09/2021	11:05	An empty classroom	6.32 mins.
M5	5	16/09/2021	09:17	An empty classroom	8.29 mins.
M6	6	16/09/2021	09:35	An empty classroom	7.13 mins.
F7	7	16/09/2021	09:55	An empty classroom	14.39 mins.
M8	8	17/09/2021	13:07	An office	10.49 mins.
M9	9	20/09/2021	15:35	An empty classroom	7.47 mins.
F10	10	20/09/2021	15:50	An empty classroom	9.07 mins.
M11	11	22/09/2021	11:55	An empty classroom	9.23 mins.
F12	12	22/09/2021	13:10	An empty classroom	11.18 mins.
M13	13	22/09/2021	13:55	An empty classroom	6.55 mins.
F14	14	23/09/2021	09:03	An empty classroom	8.48 mins.
M15	15	23/09/2021	10:00	An empty classroom	12.39 mins.
The total period of the interview			2 hours 28 minutes 58 seconds		

As can be seen in Table 2, the interviews lasted between 6.32 and 14.39 minutes, and the interviews were held between September 10, 2021, and September 23, 2021, mostly in emphty classrooms of schools where participants were working. The interviews lasted 2 hours 28 minutes 58 seconds in total.

2.4. Data analysis

The approach suggested by Creswell (2013) for qualitative data analysis was adopted in the analysis of the research data. Accordingly, the analysis started with the deciphering of the audio recordings taken during the interviews. Then, the data written on the paper was read in detail by the researcher several times to grasp the exact meaning of the text. The data were analyzed by content analysis technique. As a result of the content analysis, the themes and codes were reached. Then, these themes and codes were brought together to ensure integrity. The similarities and differences between the themes and codes produced in this period were also taken into account. In addition, during the reporting of the findings, direct quotations from the participants were included in the appropriate sections. Finally, we attributed symbols such as M for male participants and F for female participants when reporting direct quotations. For instance, F3 means the third participant out of 15, who is female.

In order to ensure the credibility of the study, the interviews with the participants were kept as long as possible and the details were tried to be discovered. In addition, by using the participant confirmation mechanism, the opinions of each participant were sent to them again and they were asked to indicate the places they would like to add/remove. In order to ensure transferability, detailed descriptions were provided. The content analysis method was used to ensure consistency. In this context, an expert working in the field of social studies was asked to examine the research as a whole and to state his suggestions, if any. These recommendations were used to increase the quality of the study. Finally, in order to ensure confirmability, the faculty member who made the consistency analysis was asked to review the research findings in detail and to present any suggestions, if any. In this way, it has been tried to ensure that the analysis period of the data is integrated.

3. Results

3.1. Distance Learning Experiences of Teachers During the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

During the COVID-19 pandemic period, technological disruptions have an important place in teachers' experiences. All of the teachers who participated in the research reported that there were technological disruptions in the distance education period and that these problems had negative effects on the teaching period. When the technology-related problems are examined in more detail, the most emphasized point by the participants was

the weak internet infrastructure. According to this, the lack of a strong internet connection at home prevented the students from continuing their classes and this caused a serious decrease in the quality of teaching. Some of the participants' views on the subject are directly quoted below:

"Due to the impossibilities of the region where I worked at the beginning (no internet infrastructure), the average number of students who attended the live classes was five. Apart from that, I had lessons with one student for weeks, and I even had lessons where no student showed up." (F7), *"The inadequacy of the internet provider was the issue that I had the most difficulty and could not find a solution for."* (F12) and *"Some of the students had too much internet shortage in their places and they could not attend the classes fully".* (F3)

Technology problems are not limited to weak internet connections. Participants stated that some students do not have enough opportunities to acquire technological devices. In other words, the differences between students, especially in terms of socio-economic level, were reflected in the opportunity to access technological devices during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The experiences of teachers who teach via distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic period show that the access problems arising from the aforementioned socio-economic level differences significantly affect the quality of teaching in this period. The opinions of some participants in this direction support the above comment:

"I have experienced that distance education is more difficult than face-to-face education and that not every student has access to a tablet, computer, and internet" (M6), *"One of the biggest problems I experienced in the period was that students with a high level of success did not have a tool to enter the course."* (F10) and *"For the students who attend and follow the course constantly, the lessons are efficient, but the efficiency was extremely low in the courses where a few students could attend and the others could not attend due to impossibility."* (M11)

Another experience of teachers regarding the distance education period is generally related to the teaching environment or conditions of the lessons. One of the factors expressed in this direction is the intervention of the student's parent or sibling towards the lesson. A significant part of the participants stated that the factors such as "answering the teacher's question to the student, interfering with the student, and engaging in activities that distract the student taking lessons with distance education" caused

disruptions in the functioning of the teaching period. Some of the participants' views on the subject are directly quoted below:

"It was also not pleasant to hear that the families of a few of my students were listening to the lectures and answering my questions behind their backs." (F3) and *"However, there were some negative situations, such as the involvement of families in the lessons."* (M1)

Some participants related the above-mentioned similar situations to "the absence of a suitable working/studying/learning environment at home": *"Since the students who took the class did not have a room of their own, it was necessary to teach in a crowded family environment so that all family members could hear us and we could hear them."* (M8) Another factor related to this is that the motivation and attention level of the students in distance education is extremely low. All of the teachers who participated in the research stated that most of the students had low learning motivation and attention levels in the distance education period, and this turned into a factor that seriously hindered the teaching period. Participants also stated that attracting the attention of students to the lesson, keeping this interest alive throughout the lesson, and enabling them to concentrate on the lesson are among the elements that they focus on and spare the most time in the distance education period. On the other hand, some participants stated that as a result of the above-mentioned problems in distance education, course absenteeism is extremely high and in this context, they have made a significant effort to minimize this absenteeism. A participant's statement in this regard is as follows:

"The major problem I faced during this period was to keep the students' interest in the lesson alive and to prevent absenteeism." (M5)

Another important situation in the distance education experiences of teachers is related to classroom management. Research findings show that teachers make substantial efforts to manage the classroom in online lessons, to keep students' motivation to learn high, and to maintain classroom order and discipline. Because distance education has changed the basic principles and principles of classroom management for traditional face-to-face education. The fact that face-to-face interaction and eye contact, which are among the basic elements of traditional face-to-face education, have gained a different dimension in the distance education period, has caused serious pressure and stress especially on teachers who are not prepared for the new period or who do not have previous experience of teaching through distance education. A teacher expressed her experience in this regard as follows:

"While it is easier to control and observe students in the classroom, disciplinary problems can be encountered when the other party abuses the period in the distance education period, and instant intervention is not possible because we are not in the same environment. You can only send vibrations; you give a verbal warning during the lesson, at the end of the

lesson, at the beginning of the next lesson, but the students who read what they know do not come out." (M9)

One of the important experiences of the participants in distance education is about adapting the curriculum used for face-to-face education to distance education. In this context, almost all of the participants stated that the programs used in face-to-face education were not functional in the distance education period and that a different program was needed for distance education due to its nature. However, teachers who are accustomed to face-to-face education stated that they had to make some adaptations and changes in the program with the changing course hours in distance education, and this sometimes reflected negatively on the effectiveness of the given course. A participant's statement on this subject provides a very clear understanding of this experience:

"We had to adapt many of the activities in the annual plan to distance education, and we could not carry out some of them and postponed them." (F3)

Although the participants' experiences with distance education mostly refer to negative qualities or difficulties or disruptions related to distance education, it is seen that some participants also mentioned the positive aspects of distance education:

"I developed myself in the field of educational sciences. I turned the crisis environment into a productive one." (M13) and *"Using technology, preparing and using web 2 tools, converting subject-specific ready-made materials into digital, preparing and applying educational games, more contact with parents, being guests at students' homes, getting to know students and parents in their natural environment, observing their economic levels. I have experienced that distance education makes things easier and has advantages to a certain extent."* (M15)

Some participants emphasized the "flexibility in space" element provided by distance education and emphasized that it is an important convenience to be able to connect to distance education courses from anywhere with the internet:

"Perhaps the only positive experience I had during this period was being able to connect to the lessons from wherever I wanted, regardless of place or time." (F7) and *"Although distance education may seem negative, I also believe that it has positive aspects as it saves time and space. I think that if the principle of equality in education can be applied, it will be an application that can be used."* (M8)

3.2. Teachers' Practices for Increasing Efficiency in Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period

The transfer of lessons from face-to-face to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic brought along many difficulties, as stated above. During this period, teachers experienced different situations that negatively affected the quality of their classroom teaching. These experiences, which emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic period, forced

teachers to take a series of measures to ensure the effectiveness of teaching. When viewed holistically, it can be stated that these measures are mostly dressing and temporary. In other words, the distance education period caused a series of problems and teachers had to produce palliative solutions for these problems.

Among these solutions, one of the ways that teachers used the most was EBA content and video and audio recordings with audio-visual dimensions. Participants especially stated that they use the EBA system very effectively and that EBA has a functional structure in terms of delivering homework to students. However, almost all of the teachers stated that they benefited from various animations and visuals for a more effective lecture; They stated that they preferred to embody/simplify the teaching by giving importance to the use of pictures, photographs, maps, graphics, sound files, and diagrams. Some participants stated that they aim to make lessons that attract more attention, motivate students to learn, and excite them by making use of educational games. One participant expressed how he used educational games in online lessons as follows:

"Educational games such as puzzles, competitions, and matching are mostly liked by students. It is time-consuming to prepare and apply. It has functionality in the period of warming the student to the lesson at the beginning of the lesson, reinforcing what has been learned in the middle, or measurement-evaluation at the end of the lesson." (M15)

Research findings have also shown that teachers act according to the content and objectives of the course while planning online activities. Accordingly, some teachers have chosen to benefit from various conceptual activities in their lessons. It is understood that activities such as concept maps, analogy, and mind maps have an important place among them. One participant justified such a practice as follows:

"If the subject/theme to be taught is limited to a single or a few concepts, conceptual activities may be more functional; such as immigration of tribes, resettlement policy, abolition of the sultanate." (M13)

There are other elements that teachers focus on to increase students' motivation to learn and reduce absenteeism. Among these, there is the Z book application and quizzes. However, it is seen that some teachers also use WhatsApp effectively to interact more with their students. One participant expressed how he benefited from this application with the following statements:

"The teacher of each class had created a WhatsApp group, and as teachers, we used to enter all the WhatsApp groups of the classes we were attending and encourage them to enter the lesson ten minutes before the lesson started and at the beginning of the lesson by sending

the link of the lesson to the groups or by calling the students with tablets at the beginning of the lesson." (F7)

The above quote can be seen as important as it shows how teachers use a social media platform to keep students in class. However, the current situation can also be read as one of the important solutions that teachers have produced to increase class participation and make lessons more effective. Other participants used the same social media platform as stated that they used it for the purpose:

"Sending subject comprehension tests to students on weekends and trying to check these tests and identify their missing parts" (F5) and *"I tried to practice by preparing tests, summary notes, exercises and sending them to them. I sent short videos about the lesson."* (F14)

3.3. Reflections of the COVID-19 Pandemic Period on the Professional Life of Teachers

The transition from face-to-face education environments to online during the COVID-19 pandemic pushed teachers to take some professional precautions because teaching online and ensuring the effectiveness of the lessons required teachers to change and improve their teaching practices for the traditional classroom, at least to a certain extent. In this context, all of the teachers participating in the research stated that they had to improve themselves in the use of technology in order to teach more effectively during the COVID-19 pandemic period. In this period, teachers stated that having skills in using technology provides an important privilege in conducting effective teaching. They stated that teachers who used technology effectively were more successful in motivating students to learn and ensuring course continuity. On the contrary, teachers who did not find themselves at the desired level of proficiency in using technology experienced adaptation problems in this period and felt that they were inadequate in supporting student learning. A participant's views on the subject summarize the current situation:

"There were times in my professional life when I felt inadequate. Frankly, I was very unsolved on this issue, because it was the first time I taught in such an environment. Since it is a subject that I am inexperienced with, I had a hard time like a child on this subject. Another issue was that I had difficulty communicating with children in the virtual environment. I tried to overcome this with the children over time. At the same time, trying to establish a bond with the children was another issue that I had difficulty with." (F2)

The participant statement presented above can be considered important in that it shows that the ability to use technology is one of the most important variables that affect a teacher's effective performance in the distance education period. However, another important point to be emphasized in terms of the reflections of the COVID-19 pandemic period on the teaching profession is the nature of the teaching profession. Because teachers

are in a continuous professional development period in order to respond to the changing learning needs of students; they are expected to learn more effectively by gaining new knowledge and skills. In this regard, the findings of the current research show that the COVID-19 pandemic period helps teachers better understand the changing nature of the teaching profession. For example, the participants stated the following about the teaching profession in this period:

"They understood that it is a profession that is not static and needs to keep up with the times" (M1), *"In order to be able to teach effectively in online environments, it is necessary to prepare appropriate quality content"* (M4) and *"They realized that the teaching profession is not limited to the classroom environment"* (F10). Therefore, during the COVID-19 pandemic period;

"They have become more willing to participate in activities such as courses and seminars to improve themselves professionally." (F3)

These findings can be considered important as they show that the COVID-19 pandemic process is effective in better understanding the changing nature of the teaching profession by teachers. In other words, although the COVID-19 pandemic process caused a series of disruptions in teaching in terms of quantity and quality, the other side of the coin was the understanding of the aspect of the teaching profession that requires continuous professional development. Another dimension of professional development is new teachers. Regarding the subject of a participant;

"As a teacher who started live lessons without coming face to face with newly appointed students, I felt inadequate in many places. There were some activities that we had to do with the students. Even though we did these openly with the cameras, it was an unsatisfactory year in terms of events as it was not like face-to-face. I felt the need to develop myself more in this direction." (F12)

The expression above reveals that new teachers may require professional development in this direction based on the problems arising from the use of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic process.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The first finding of the current study is related to the distance education experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, teachers especially expressed the problems they experienced in technological issues and stated that this situation had negative reflections on the teaching process. One of the negativities emphasized by the participants in this process is the problems with the internet infrastructure. This situation has turned into a very important problem for teachers who do not have a strong internet connection at home, and especially for students who have to connect to their classes from

their homes. Similar to the findings of this study, Karakuş and Karacaoğlu (2021) stated that there are serious problems related to technological infrastructure in the distance education process. Similarly, in the study conducted by Bayburtlu (2020), it was determined that there are connection-related problems in distance education. Kuş, Mert, and Boyraz (2021), on the other hand, concluded that a significant portion of students residing in rural areas could not access distance education activities. Problems related to hardware, especially internet infrastructure, have been emphasized in many other studies on distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Akkuş & Acar, 2017; Asmara, 2020; Dias, Lopes & Teles, 2020; Mohan, McCoy, Carroll, Mihut, Lyons & Domhnaill, 2020).

In the current study, it is understood that the most important reasons why individuals cannot access distance education activities are the low socio-economic level of the parents of the students, the problematic internet infrastructure at home, and the lack of technological tools. Another result obtained in relation to this finding of the research is that the differences in socio-economic level are some problems experienced by students in acquiring technological devices. This result shows that the children of families whose socio-economic status is not good have more problems in accessing distance education. The right to education, which can be considered as one of the most basic rights of students due to reasons beyond their control, and the difficulties they experience in reaching it can be seen as important in terms of not providing social justice. When the relevant literature is examined, it is understood that similar findings have been reached in other studies. Sönmez, Yıldırım, and Çetinkaya (2020) revealed that the socio-economic status of students is an important determinant in the quality of distance education applications carried out during the pandemic. Yıldız and Akar-Vural (2020) prepared a report on inequalities in education during the COVID-19 pandemic process, with weak internet infrastructure, however, without technology tools (PC, laptop, TV, etc.), low socio-economic income. It has been revealed that the children of the families from the group cannot benefit from distance education activities to the desired extent. Gökkaya's (2019) research findings show that the internet infrastructure and access to the internet are more problematic for those residing in rural areas than children living in cities. In other studies, it is emphasized that students who do not have an internet network at home or do not have a computer cannot benefit from the distance education process sufficiently (Carrillo & Flores, 2020). Whether students have an internet network or a computer causes serious debates in the field on the axis of equality of opportunity (Bennett, Uink & Cross, 2020). In this context, it is understood that the most serious factor in accessing the distance education process is the socio-economic differences of the families. In the Education Monitoring Report prepared by Diker-Coşkun (2020), it has been determined that the income level of families directly affects the distance education process and that families with low income have difficulties in obtaining and accessing teaching materials. In the study conducted by Sönmez, Yıldırım, and Çetinkaya (2020), it was revealed that the income level has serious

effects on the students' access to distance education services and the smooth realization of this education.

Karahan, Bozan, and Akçay (2020) examined the distance education processes in the COVID-19 pandemic and revealed that students, especially those living in rural areas, had problems with technology and equipment, and had difficulties in getting internet service and connecting. Yıldız and Akar-Vural (2020) also state that students who are not provided with supporting materials (reading books, worksheets, etc.) that they can use at home can only use EBA TV content, and this may create inequality of opportunity.

Another remarkable point in the research findings is the problems arising from the lack of suitable lectures and working conditions in the houses where the students live. In the related literature, it has been determined that distractions at home affect learning negatively in studies on the subject. Yılmaz, Güner, Mutlu, Doğanay, and Yılmaz (2020) stated that a significant portion of the students lacks a regular working environment at home; Mohan, McCoy, Carroll, Mihut, Lyons, and Domhnaill (2020) determined that there are problems in the silence of the environment during the distance education activities, and it becomes more difficult to attend the lesson when there is more than one sibling in the same house. This finding of the study shows that students who do not have their own working environment in the distance education process are affected by the distractions that occur at home and have difficulty concentrating because they cannot interact sufficiently with their teachers. However, due to the limited teacher-student interaction in distance education courses, distraction can be considered as an expected situation.

Likewise, it is seen that almost all of the teachers stated that the motivation of the students regarding the course was low in the distance education process. The relevant literature supports this finding of our research. It is stated that students' interest and desire for learning decreased during the pandemic period (Mohan, McCoy, Carroll, Mihut, Lyons & Domhnaill, 2020; Yılmaz, Güner, Mutlu, Doğanay & Yılmaz, 2020). In the study conducted by Bayburtlu (2020), it was determined that the level of interest of the students decreased during the distance education process. Similarly, Demir and Kale (2020) emphasized that students' motivation decreased during the distance education process.

On the other hand, students' absenteeism is another factor determined by the participants in this study. There may be different reasons for students' absenteeism. Zan (2020) states that the reason for students' absenteeism is the inability of students to reach technical equipment due to their financial inadequacies. Özgöl, Sarıkaya, and Öztürk (2017) state in their study that problems arising from the internet infrastructure constitute one of the most important obstacles to an effective online course. Demir and Kale (2020) also support these results, emphasizing the low participation in online classes, albeit for various reasons.

Another result obtained from the opinions of the participants is the difficulties experienced in adapting the existing curriculum to this new process. In this context, almost

all of the participants stated that the programs used in face-to-face education were not functional in the distance education process and that a different program was needed for distance education due to its nature. The study conducted by Batmaz, Cevahir-Batmaz, and Kılıç (2021) shows that the limited teaching methods and techniques that can be used in the distance education process and the inability to carry out textbook activities through distance education are among the important problems experienced by teachers. In addition to these, Yurtbakan and Akyıldız (2020) pointed out that the course hours allocated for gains during the pandemic process are insufficient. The research findings of Arslan and Şumuer (2020) show that teachers have difficulties in producing digital content in the distance education process. The main reason for this may be the temporary closure of schools due to the pandemic and the fact that teachers have to teach online without preparing appropriate content.

The second finding reached in the study is the findings regarding the experiences of teachers regarding the practices of increasing effectiveness in teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic process. Accordingly, the teachers stated that they experienced some situations that negatively affected the quality of their classroom teaching during this period. According to the teachers, this new process, which they encountered unexpectedly, brought some problems with it and forced the teachers to produce urgent solutions. Among these solutions, EBA contents and some video and audio recordings are the most remarkable ones. Especially teachers stated that EBA is quite functional in this process. Other studies have shown that teachers effectively benefit from EBA in this process. In this period, education and training activities in Turkey were carried out intensively at the primary and secondary levels through the EBA virtual environment and TRT EBA. The EBA virtual environment, which was implemented within the scope of the FATIH project in 2010, gained great importance with the COVID-19 pandemic process; used effectively by teachers and students. Similarly, Ünay, Erdem, and Çakıroğlu (2021) stated in their research that teachers mostly benefited from EBA, EBA TV, online videos and applications and pictures during the pandemic. While the participants of the current research emphasize the functionality of EBA, in the study conducted by Mengi and Alpdoğan (2020), it was determined that students' watching EBA TV, receiving education with the help of mobile phones or social networks increased students' technology addiction. Again, the teachers stated that they experienced connection problems during the distance education studies carried out over EBA during the COVID-19 pandemic process (Kırmızı & Altuğ, 2021). One of them has been the Zoom software. However, after a while, they stopped using Zoom with the advice of the ministry due to various security vulnerabilities; they continued their education only on the EBA platform and EBA TV (Balaman & Hanbay Tiryaki, 2021). This finding of the research shows that platforms such as EBA and EBA TV, prepared by

the ministry, are important in producing content and using the produced content to increase the effectiveness of the course.

In the study, it has been determined that almost all of the participants used animation, visual tools (pictures, photos, maps, etc.), and some educational games to make the lesson more effective. Participants stated that they tried to make teaching remarkable and understandable and to motivate students to learn. Therefore, it is understood that some social studies teachers who participated in the research included activities such as concept maps, analogies, and mind maps on appropriate subjects in their lessons. In addition, it is understood that teachers use Z book applications, quizzes, and WhatsApp applications effectively to increase learning motivation.

Several research has shown that teachers benefit greatly from these practices. Sönmez, Yıldırım, and Çetinkaya (2020) state that a significant portion of teachers benefited from additional resources during the epidemic period. Batmaz, Cevahir-Batmaz, and Kılıç (2020) revealed that teachers use textbooks, videos and animations, educational platforms, visual presentations, activities shared via the internet, educational games, and interactive pdf and Z books as teaching materials in the distance education process. However, in some studies, it has been determined that teachers use classroom WhatsApp groups to communicate with their students (Zan, 2021). The participants of the current study also stated that they communicated with students and their families about the use of various online education tools and the work that can be done at home via WhatsApp.

The last finding reached in the research is the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic process on the reflections of the professional life of teachers. All of the teachers participating in the research stated that they had to use technology more effectively in order to increase the effectiveness of the course during the COVID-19 pandemic process, and therefore they went to improve their technology usage skills. According to the participants, teachers who could benefit from technology effectively organized the distance education process better and thus were more successful in motivating students to learn and increasing student engagement in classes. Reversely, it has been revealed that teachers with low awareness of technological developments and with limited ability to make use of technology tend to have more problems in this process.

Another point emphasized by the participants is that students prepare themselves for new processes in order to respond to their changing learning needs and are in a continuous professional development process. It is understood that the COVID-19 pandemic is an important experience for teachers in terms of demonstrating the importance of this issue. Eti and Karaduman (2020) determined that some of the pre-service teachers felt professionally competent during the pandemic process, while some of them needed improvement and felt inadequate.

Our results revealed that the differences in the socio-economic levels of the students are reflected in the possibilities of accessing distance education tools and internet connections.

In other words, students from families with a high socio-economic level had less difficulty in attending classes with the opportunities they had during the distance education process. This situation has brought the issue of equal opportunity to the agenda again. From this point of view, our results implicate that MEB should produce policies to ensure equal opportunities among students and ensure that these are implemented effectively. Besides, the participants of the research stated that they had difficulties in providing students' participation and learning motivation during the distance education process. It can therefore be suggested that teachers receive training on classroom management strategies in distance education, based on the fact that the pandemic process has not yet ended and that distance education can be reverted to or that hybrid models can be adopted. In this process, it is considered important that the school principal plays the role of facilitator. In addition, increasing the quality of the platforms used in the distance education process in terms of content and usage can be an important action step. It is understood that teachers need more support in terms of increasing the effectiveness of the lesson with the better use of technology. In this respect, it can be considered important to bring this issue to the agenda from the professional learning processes carried out in the school and to create a climate for everyone to learn in the school. In other words, school-based development strategies should be supported in teacher professional learning. Each school should have goals set for professional development, and their realization should be followed and supported at the provincial, district and ministry levels.

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