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A Phenomenological Study of Teachers' Adaptation Process to Distance Education in the COVID-19 Period

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ABSTRACT

Distance education has emerged as an alternative way to meet basic education needs during the Covid-19 process. This study, aimed to study the experiences of teachers in the process of adaptation to distance education during the COVID-19 process. In this direction, phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research methods was used in the research. The participants of the study were selected as ten secondary school teachers in Türkiye who conducted distance education courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data of the study were obtained as a result of in-depth interviews through the semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher. In the study using inductive content analysis, the themes explaining teachers' experiences in the process of adaptation to distance education; technical challenges, difficulty in motivation, education everywhere, technology integration, social deficiencies, learning losses, addiction to technology, use of digital material and communicative difficulty were determined. The study findings were discussed in line with the literature and suggestions were developed.

Keywords: Distance education, covid-19, adaptation, phenomenology.

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Introduction

The whole world is trying to adapt to the new order emerged due to Covid-19 which has social, cultural, economic, and educational effects. In this process, it was clear that it was a necessity, not a need, that the education should continue even remotely, and in this direction, most of the education programs were decided to continue through distance education in the period 2019-2020, either synchronously or asynchronously. Indeed, the majority mentioned here corresponds to 91% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020).

Distance education is defined as a way of education in which students and stakeholders are separated by a certain distance (Perraton, 2020). In other words, distance education is a teaching-learning approach that has been subjected to instructional design to serve an effective teaching purpose (Sewart et al., 2020). These understanding and practices include multi-faceted and technological dimensions such as the planning of education, the methods used, teacher and student roles, feedback system, and evaluation. For this reason, it is critical for education systems to make plans in the context of distance education needs for each dimension (Evans and Nation, 2020).

The integration of technology into teaching is widely researched and supported worldwide. The development of information communication technologies and the use of this development in learning-teaching processes make learning more flexible and sustainable (Anderson and Rivera Vargas, 2020; Bertiz and Karoglu, 2020; Johnston, 2020). Sub-dimensions such as student characteristics, current conditions, content to be offered to students, teaching method to be used in the presentation of content, feedback and evaluation mechanisms for experiences should also be taken into consideration when these applications are employed although technology applications used in this direction are one of the cornerstones of distance education (Koszalka and Ganesan, 2004; Shearer et al., 2020).

Distance education practices mainly include the development of distance education programs, evaluation, and redevelopment of existing ones (Anderson, 2001). However, current distance education practices are tried to be carried out with activities carried out in the context of the direct application of digital technologies, not in the context of instructional planning or program development (Balaman and Hanbay Tiryaki, 2021; Demir and Özdaş, 2020; Sari and Nayır, 2020). For this reason, it is possible to say that the distance education practices carried out are rapid distance education activities that do not go through the program development process based on the sudden emergence of education and the need to continue it (Bervell and Umar, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020).

The rapid digital transformation of the education process required teachers to adapt to this process at the same speed. Teachers were expected to quickly acquire/update knowledge and skills related to distance education and to carry out qualified teaching practices in virtual classrooms with this change (Bervell and Umar, 2020; Koszalka and Ganesan, 2004; Liu et al., 2020; Öztürk, 2020). On the one hand, teachers must cope with the negative effects of the pandemic process, on the other hand, they carry out distance education practices (Koçoğlu and Tekdal, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). For this reason, it is thought that the experiences obtained during the Covid-19 process will shed light on the planning of future, ongoing distance education practices and during the Covid-19 process

will shed light on future plans, ongoing distance education practices and the literature. In this line, the study aims to examine the experiences of teachers who are one of the main characters of the education process in the adaptation process to distance education during the COVID-19 process.

Method

Research Model

The qualitative research method was used in this study. Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research as the process of making sense of social life and human problems by questioning them with unique methods. In this study, phenomenology design was used to examine the experiences of teachers during the adaptation process to distance education during the COVID-19 process. Phenomenological research explains the meanings that people attribute to their experiences by aiming to gain insight into them (Plano Clark, 2011). Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013) define the phenomenology pattern as a subset of the qualitative research paradigm while Vagle (2014) defines the phenomenology pattern as a reflective and inductive methodology. In this direction, the main research question of the research is "What are the experiences of teachers regarding distance education adaptation processes during the Covid-19 period?" it is structured within the framework of. In addition, the phenomenon of this research is teacher's distance education adaptation processes during the Covid-19 period.

Study Group

Creswell (2007) suggests a study that includes “long interviews of up to ten people” for phenomenological research. This number can follow changes according to the state of obtaining data satisfaction in the process. In this direction, convenience sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used in the research. Accordingly, the study group of the research was selected as ten secondary school teachers working in Izmir, Turkey. It was taken into consideration to select participants with different branches, experiences, ages, and gender characteristics to provide maximum diversity in the study. Personal information about the participants is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Information on participants

Code	Gender	Age	Field of Study	Seniority
P1	Female	32	Turkish Language Teacher	6
P2	Female	40	Turkish Language Teacher	14
P3	Male	53	Mathematics Teacher	32
P4	Female	25	Mathematics Teacher	3
P5	Female	41	Science Teacher	19
P6	Female	26	Science Teacher	4
P7	Male	42	Social Sciences Teacher	19
P8	Female	25	Social Sciences Teacher	2
P9	Male	47	English Language Teacher	26
P10	Female	27	English Language Teacher	5

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview form was developed to collect the data of the research. In this form, nine open-ended questions were asked about the characteristics and situations that support and limit the adaptation of secondary school teachers to the distance education process, how teachers define distance education, and how they operate in the distance education process. The interview which was created in its first form sent to three experts working in the field of education and two experts responded in line with the literature review. Pilot interviews were held with two teachers who were not in the participant group with the interview form organized in line with the expert opinions. The final interview form was prepared for the original interviews after the pilot interview and expert opinions.

Data Collection and Analyses

The data of the study were collected by conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted by holding online meetings with the consent and approval of the participants. The interviews lasted between 25 and 45 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the participants. The data analysis steps suggested by Colaizzi (1978) in phenomenology research were used in the inductive content analysis of the data of the study. In these steps:

1. Interviews transcribed from beginning to end were reread to get an idea of everyone's past and experiences to make sense of the data.
2. Important statements directly related to the proposed phenomenon were noted in the transcripts.
3. The interpretive meanings of each of the important expressions were sought.
4. The research protocols were reread to ensure that the original description was clear in interpretive meanings.
5. Categories that allow the emergence of themes are organized in interpretative meanings. At this point, verification was sought, recurring themes were avoided, and any inconsistencies in this process were noted.
6. The themes were then explained comprehensively.
7. A brief statement of the comprehensive definition was produced by the researcher and a basic identification expression was produced.
8. A brief statement of the comprehensive description was presented to the participants of the study to confirm the results and development. The inconsistencies were noted, and the researcher returned to the participants through important statements, interpretive meanings, and themes to address their concerns (pp. 48-71).

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are mandatory elements for qualitative research because they ensure that participant representation is accurately identified and depicted (Creswell, 2007). In this sense, it is suggested that many ways for researchers seeking parallel approaches can lead to effective validation. In the interview technique, Merriam (2009) states that it is a limitation that both the participant and the researcher are subject to

prejudices. In this sense, prejudices, predispositions, and attitudes can affect the validity of the data. For this reason, expert opinion was taken simultaneously during the research process to help the correct interpretation of the data. Feedback from the evaluations was noted. Participant confirmation was made to allow participants to check for discrepancies in their opinions and to explain more. This process helps researchers “control their subjectivity and ensure the reliability of their findings” (Jones, 2002). Finally, the statements of the participants were directly transferred and reported without any changes.

Results

In this study, which aims to examine teachers' experiences of adaptation to distance education during the Covid-19 period, the themes that explain the adaptation process to distance education were determined as technical challenges, difficulty in motivation, education everywhere, technology integration, social deficiencies, learning losses, addiction to technology, use of digital material and communicative difficulty. These themes were visualized as in Figure 1 and participant statements related to each theme were presented under headings.

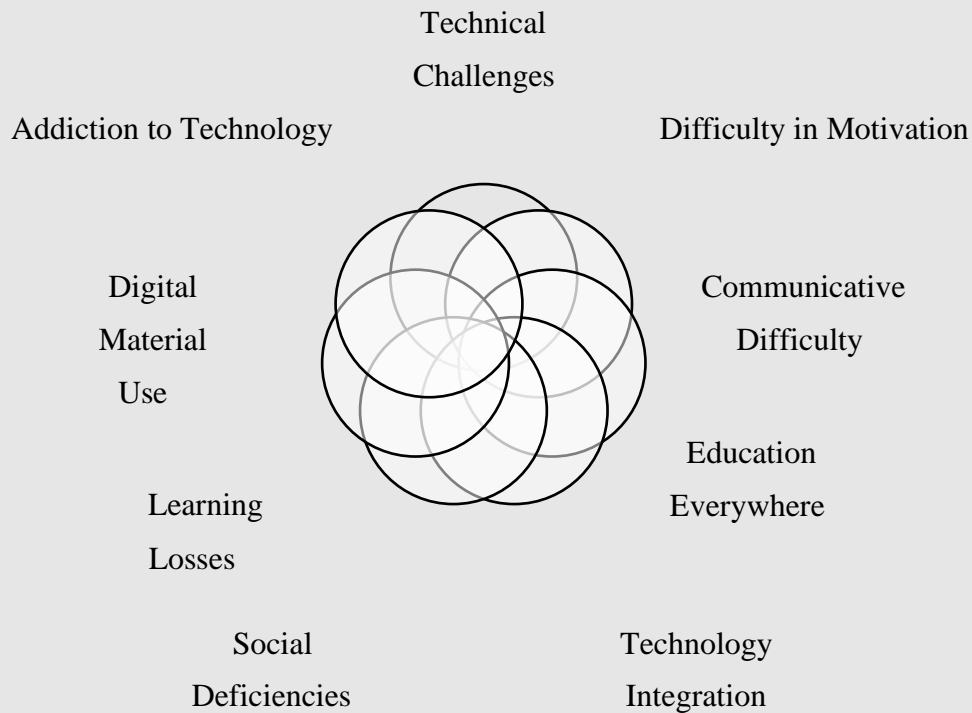


Figure 1. Themes explaining teachers' adaptation process to distance education

Findings Related to the Theme “Technical Challenges”

Changing world conditions have brought about innovations in the field of education and training as in many other fields. In the face of the digital transformation experienced during the pandemic process, teachers stated that they experienced some technical difficulties while managing the process. Participant statements on this theme are as follows:

P1-We are experiencing internet disconnection. The kids are exhausted, and bored, and we are trying to figure something out. It is especially difficult to write on the screen and to point out, that I do not feel like I can write at any time. There is always an uneasiness when you're going to write.

P6-There is continuous network disconnection or voice commutes. I cannot be sure if the voice is gone or if what I'm saying is understood. The app is logging in me or the students become logged out. Half of the lesson is -wasted when you try to reconnect, etc.

P10-The negativities were quite high when the process started. Like audio-camera problems, lack of material. The process of getting used to the programs we use in distance education took 1-2 months. Then we got a little more used to it.

Teachers stated that education practices are not efficient due to technical problems in the distance education process as it is seen in the direct quotations.

Findings Related to the Theme “Difficulty in Motivation”

As it is known, one of the most basic elements that determine the quality of the education process is the appeal to the effective field. In the distance education process, the effective deficiency of both students and teachers is a basic problem that makes it difficult for them to adapt to the process. The statements related to this theme are presented below.

P1- Students think that they are now moving away from education. It is very difficult to motivate them in this process. There is a problem with focusing and it is not very efficient. The kids are into other stuff on the computer. The lack of a controlling mechanism worsens the very process. They do not want to turn on the camera. This is an unsolvable problem.

P4- In online education, I cannot get much satisfaction in teaching; I cannot sense the feeling of "I taught this to you". It is usually in the form of lecture and pass, lecture, and pass. I observe that a stagnating education process is being conducted. I am not enjoying it, and I hope we can get back to our classes as soon as possible.

P7-The biggest difficulty I have is that the students are reluctant because it is difficult to constantly try to channel them to the lesson and keep their interest alive. It is a very challenging process to try to raise this interest in each course and get used to adapting them to the course. I try to motivate them in every class every week. Which, frankly, is more mentally exhausting than lecturing.

P9- They do not think that they are educated because they participate in the lesson through a digital device in their homes since the concepts of school, course, and classroom are included in different schemas in their minds. I also have to conduct the lesson uniformly and unfortunately with continuous verbal warnings. I cannot apply an activity other than a few posters, visuals, and videos that I have reflected on the screen related to the subject that I have put into practice to draw their attention to myself and the subject. I cannot apply an activity that they can participate in the class and enjoy.

As seen in the statements of the participants, the teachers stated that they had difficulty motivating and motivating during the COVID-19 process, and therefore they carried out a more stable education process compared to face-to-face education practices.

Findings Related to the Theme “Education Everywhere”

In a rapidly changing world, learning environments have also entered a rapid transformation process. In this process, all stakeholders of education have the opportunity to continue education at any time and from anywhere. The opinions of the participants regarding the theme stated in this direction are as follows:

P2- Students would have stayed away from us at home if online education weren't available. Therefore, it is a good thing we're just a phone call away. I think it is an advantage to be able to reach them somehow.

P4 - I feel comfortable. I can feel dominant in the process as long as I handle the technological possibilities. In addition, being at home feels safe in this process.

P10-Students and we can attend lessons from various places such as from our hometowns. There has been a substantial change. We had things we could not imagine until a year or two ago.

Teachers emphasized that the freedom to teach from unusual places positively affects the process of adaptation to distance education as is seen in the direct quotations.

Findings Related to the Theme “Technology Integration”

The technology that guides today is considered to be one of the biggest variables affecting the quality and efficiency of education. In this process, it is known that teachers who cannot be integrated into technology have difficulties in the process of adaptation to distance education. The statements of the participants regarding the specified theme are given below.

P1- I conduct research for the use of technology that will improve myself about the process and I try to make positive contributions to the process since this process is prolonged. I still feel inadequate towards my students despite all this. They write on the screen, they change their names, and they put things on the screenshots that will not happen. Every day has different matters. Theirs cannot compete with my tech speed.

P5- Situations such as not undergoing a serious education process related to education and that most teachers do not have any experience with distance education before are among the situations that limit the adaptation process the most. However, I think that teachers who are good with technology manage the process better.

P9-There are a few techniques we apply in line with our in-service training and research. These are just a few suggestions about digital classroom management. Our time at home has expanded and we are researching to be more ready for the lesson. However, it is very difficult to put into practice.

The teachers stated that the integration into technology guides the adaptation processes to distance education as seen in the direct statements of the participants.

Findings Related to the Theme “Social Deficiencies”

The participants stated that their students and themselves remained socially weak in the distance education process, and this process was a challenging factor in their adaptation to distance education based on the principle of the integrity of the development. Participant statements on this theme are as follows:

P4- We could do many cooperative activities and discussions when there was a face-to-face classroom environment. Students could learn a lot from each other. They could have fun together. It connects us to the screen which is a very weak system in social terms. We are doing everything we can.

P5- I believe that teaching will now become a more active, more interested, and time-consuming process. Teaching is not showmanship or babysitting. The students would learn from each other in the classroom even if the lesson was not taught before. Now it does not exist either. They can't socialize; they have a phone and a tablet.

As seen in the statements of the participants, it was emphasized that teachers and students had social deficiencies in the distance education process.

Findings Related to the Theme “Learning Losses”

The lack of achieving education goals is frequently expressed in the whole distance education process. The lack of the evaluation dimension of the system for a long time, the low motivation of the incoming student, and the fact that they do not attend the lesson cause students to experience learning losses in the process. Participant statements on this theme are as follows:

P3- Children are attempted to be provide with a lot of information in a brief time without digesting it. There is only academic knowledge and an exam-oriented structure. These children cannot play games, they cannot see their friends, therefore, how, and what success we can talk about.

P8- What students learn is seriously ignored. Students who never attended the class started to join as soon as it was announced that the exams would be held online. Some students graduated without knowing the name of the course.

P10-The effectiveness of the lessons is discussed. I do not think that students can learn the subjects that they benefit from this process. Students who do not have access to tablets, phones, and the internet make me think. Participation in classes of 30-40 students is conducted with 12-13 students. We are having a class without learning anything.

As stated in the statements of the teachers, there were learning losses during the COVID-19 process, and there were difficulties in achieving the goals. In this process, the failure to successfully achieve the teaching objectives appears to be an element that makes it difficult for teachers to adapt to distance education.

Findings Related to the Theme “Addiction to Technology”

Many disadvantages force individuals physically and mentally in addition to the numerous advantages of technology. At this point, teachers stated that this compulsory state in the use of technology is a factor that challenges the adaptation process to distance education. Participant statements related to this theme are presented below.

P2- Distance education is approached with lots of prejudice both by parents and teachers. If we are to evaluate it for today's Turkey, it is a tool that saves the day, however, if we

need to make a global comment, it is now an impossible teaching path for teachers to leave their lives.

P4- In other words, the internet and application problems and the inability to enter the application bind our hands. We also realized how important technology is in this process. Our students who cannot receive education and attend classes are completely absent from the process.

P10- There is a system that connects us to the screen. In this process, my dependence on the screen naturally increased. My eyes are watering. I get headaches all the time.

In the statements of the participants, there are opinions that it is physically and mentally challenging besides the positive aspects of technology. Some participants stated that the use of technology is at the level of addiction, has physiological effects, and that this is a factor that challenges their adaptation to distance education.

Findings Related to the Theme “Use of Digital Material”

The use of digital materials has become widespread to enrich teaching in the distance education process. At this point, the fact that teachers can benefit more from digital facilities is an element that facilitates their adaptation to distance education. The statements of the participants regarding the specified theme are given below.

P1- Distance education taught us this by forcing us while we were not aware of digital materials before. Everyone has shared an intensive amount of information and we have entered a digital transformation process.

P8- I obtained a lot of colorful and quite remarkable content since I was interested before. We can attract the attention of students with these and different games. I especially benefit from online games.

P10- I think that distance education has advantages because we have the chance to offer students continuous audiovisual alternatives. We used these materials less in normal face-to-face classes. The more we share files with students, the more productive they are. It has brought us awareness in terms of material diversity.

As seen in the excerpts, teachers stated that the distance education process provides them with richness and awareness in terms of providing digital materials. In addition, they emphasized that they had the opportunity to benefit more from technology in the planning of teaching, teaching-learning process, and evaluation stages.

Findings Related to the Theme “Communicative Difficulty”

Digital environments created with distance education have brought along many experiences that the stakeholders of the process are not used to. At this point, communication difficulties arising from technology, facilities, and individual elements emerge as an element that complicates teachers' adaptation processes to distance education. Participant statements regarding this theme are given below.

P1- First of all, education is to learn by experiencing, talking, breathing the same air, and sometimes experimenting together, however, distance education is officially a field of unmanned learning.

P4-I cannot understand where the children are and what I do not understand because the children turn off their microphones or images, they do not want to open them; we cannot

look them in the eyes, I honestly cannot understand whether the issues are understood or not. I can tell you that we have suffered great losses in communication.

P7- I think the most critical issue in education is to ensure that the student is active in the lesson. This is not possible in a crowded online meeting. I try to talk to everyone one by one, talk about the assignments I give, and touch on the points that are not understood when the lesson starts. However, there are very few students in the class.

P9-Distance education is a situation with more than one subject as in face-to-face education. In this respect, it is very difficult to get efficiency when student interest and parent relationship are not observed. Education remains as sentences suspended in the air when he/she speaks at the computer and closes the screen if the teacher-parent-student relationship is not conducted healthily.

As stated in the participant statements above, it was emphasized that there was a communication difficulty between the parties in the distance education process, and, therefore, digital applications were tried to be used to solve these problems.

Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

In this study, which aims to examine teachers' experiences of adaptation to distance education during the Covid-19 period, the themes that explain the adaptation process to distance education were determined as technical challenges, difficulty in motivation, education everywhere, technology integration, social deficiencies, learning losses, addiction to technology, use of digital material and communicative difficulty.

The quality and hardware knowledge of the technical elements that enable the interaction between the stakeholders of the education system determines the quality of education. In the findings of the research, it was seen that teachers who were caught unprepared for the technological transformation experienced during the pandemic process experienced some technical difficulties while managing the process. In addition, the fact that teachers have difficulty of motivation in the distance education process is stated as a basic problem that makes it difficult for them to adapt to the process. Similar findings were reached by Kavuk and Demirtaş (2021), Liu et al., (2020), and Zhou et al., (2020).

It is a known fact that the use of technology restructures the education processes. In the study, teachers emphasized that having the opportunity to continue education at any time and from anywhere is a positive aspect of the distance education process. On the other hand, it has been reported that integration into technology in the process determines the adaptation processes to distance education. Technology which is one of the most effective innovations of today has affected the working performance of all sectors. Similar findings were reported by Bervell & Umar (2020), Demir and Özdaş (2020) and Öztürk (2020).

In the study, the participants stated that they and their students experienced social deficiencies in the distance education process which made it difficult for them to adapt to distance education. Once more, achieving the teaching goals is another point that is frequently mentioned in the research. The lack of compulsory participation in the course and the lack of the evaluation dimension are among the reasons for learning losses. The fact that teachers cannot successfully continue their teaching task in this process is expressed as an element that makes their adaptation to distance education difficult. Similar findings have been reported by Balaman and Hanbay Tiryaki, (2021), Kavuk and Demirtaş, (2021), Sari and Nayır (2020) and Zhou et al., (2020).

Communication which is one of the basic dimensions of education has been maintained mostly through technology during the pandemic process. New and digital environments created through these channels have caused some disruptions in the communication process. At this point, communication difficulties arising from technology, facilities, and individual elements emerge as an element that complicates teachers' adaptation processes to distance education. On the other hand, many disadvantages force individuals cognitively, affectively, and locally besides the many advantages of technology. At this point, the participants stated that their technology addiction increased, and this addiction made their adaptation to distance education difficult. Similar findings are also seen in the literature (Bervelland Umar, 2020; Öztürk, 2020; Koçoglu and Tekdal (2020); Liu et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). In line with the findings of the research, the suggestions developed to facilitate the adaptation process of teachers to distance education are given below.

- In the research, findings were found that the infrastructure that will enable teachers to integrate into technology should be provided quickly. At this point, it may be suggested to take measures to provide technological infrastructure to effectively structure the distance education process.
- Curriculum development and adaptation studies can be carried out by considering the benefits of distance education although education practices continue face-to-face. A hybrid training model can be used in theoretical courses.
- Enriching the ways to ensure effective communication between the parties both in terms of variety and content throughout the distance education process can facilitate the adaptation processes of teachers to distance education. For this reason, in-service training can be given to teachers to manage processes such as program development, material development (design of virtual and digital materials), planning of teaching and learning processes, program development, and evaluation in distance education.
- It may be suggested to give elective courses and seminars on course designs in distance education to prepare future teachers for digital transformation in learning environments.

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