

## **Emergency Distance Education Experience Of Primary School Teachers Teaching First-Grade Students**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to ensure a better understanding of the stages ten primary school teachers have gone through after finding out that they are expected to offer online courses due to COVID-19 conditions. Contrary to the majority of articles that tend to emphasize the advantages of distance education while minimizing its difficulties, this study intends to arrive at a proper understanding of the phenomenon from the unique perspectives of practitioners. The phenomenological approach was particularly adopted to understand the experience of teachers, and the data obtained from the interviews were analyzed inductively. Study participants include 10 teachers who teach the first-grade students in a private primary school in Eskisehir, Turkey. The study results indicated four categories including “first reactions”, “adaptation period”, “ongoing process”, and “suggestions for a better distance education”. In line with the aim, the study also presents both negative and positive aspects of emergency distance education.

**Keywords:** Distance Education, Primary School Teachers, First Grade, COVID-19, Phenomenological Approach.

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## INTRODUCTION

In today’s information age, learning is no longer confined within the concrete walls of a classroom. Additionally, an instructor armed with a coursebook is no longer the only source of knowledge. Information sources are available everywhere and people can access them anytime (Chute, 2003). Thus, distance education has become a necessity rather than an alternative to traditional education. Although distance learning and knowledge management are the building blocks of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, distance education has a long history (Chute, 2003). According to Peters (2003), the practice of distance education dates back to 150 years ago. Both written and printed worlds along with railway and postal services are the foundations of distance education. The latest technologies also aim to provide students at a distance with a richer learning environment and connection to learning organizations and instructors (Shearer, 2003; Bozkurt, 2019).

The history of distance education technologies is divided into three generations (Bozkurt, 2019). These generations are illustrated in table 1.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Dominant technologies used</b>	<b>Target group</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
Correspondence Education	Postal services, correspondence (printing technology)	Adults who had been traditionally left out of the formal education process	Providing educational opportunities to disadvantaged people	Cost and complexity limiting the usefulness and absence of social presence
Visual-Auditory Distance Education	Audio (e.g., radio), visual-auditory (e.g., television) technology	Adults and younger learners from different backgrounds	Mediated interaction (two-way communication) Emergence of open universities	Teacher-centered instruction
Computer-Based Distance Education	Higher quality computer-based multimedia, and synchronous and asynchronous instruction	Life-long learners (all people)	Flexibility of engaging with existing problems or interests.  Networked connections	Absence of scaffolding and controlled learning environment.  Learners may start to feel lost or confused

As seen in Table 1, the first generation distance education was driven by a basic requirement of providing access to learning for those most in need of education. The primary goal of the educators was to make learning accessible to all individuals in need, irrespective of the background and context (Granger & Bowman, 2003).

Arguments and counter-arguments about distance education have developed along with technological advances in the field. Pioneering theorists such as Peters (2000) and Wedemeyer (1971) were the advocates of self-study and independent learning. They defined the key characteristics of independent learning as pacing, convenience, low-cost education opportunity, and self-determination of goals and activities (Garrison, 2000). They focused on learning and teaching, and individuals as opposed to groups. In this context, there was no place for conversation. Unlike them, another theorist, Holmberg (1989) stated that feelings of personal relationships could be revealed via well-developed self-instructional materials, so it was the responsibility of course developers to create simulated conversation. Thus, Holmberg (1989) was the first to emphasize groups as opposed to individuals. He defined the role of distance education practitioners as conversation-makers. However, concerns emerged against this theory that a written communication might not substitute for real sustained communication. Recently, third-generation technologies have allowed two-way communication between teacher-student and student-student (Anderson & Dron, 2011; Bozkurt, 2019). Thus, the conversational deficiency of distance education has been remedied.

The majority of existing articles tend to minimize the difficulties of distance education while emphasizing its virtues (Hara & Kling, 2001). However, some researchers state that distance education

is not problem-free (Hara & Kling, 2001, Can, 2020). According to Nolan (1998), compared to traditional education, the cost of distance education is not relatively low rather high due to limitless demands for instructor's time and vastly expanded overhead requirements such as equipment, upgrades, maintenance, and technical support staff. Opposed to the claims about extending educational access to those unable to get it, he stated that web-based education is a result of political leaders' desire to hold a monopoly over the knowledge that is the lifeblood of future knowledge-based industries as well as the university administrators who see it as a way to improve the image of their institutions. The results of Can's (2020) study, conducted 22 years after Nolan's (1998), demonstrated that problems related to technological infrastructure impede the settings of distance learning in Turkey.

Kling (1994) groups the theories of distance education into three genres – technological utopian, technological anti-utopian, and social realism. Technological utopians focus on its advantages without considering the negative aspects. On the other hand, technological anti-utopians primarily focus on the disadvantages of the new form of education. Unlike these two extreme perspectives, social realists take both negative and positive aspects into consideration.

### **Problem and significance of the study**

Regardless of the advantages or disadvantages, emergency distance education has recently become a reality that all educators have to embrace due to the outbreak of the COVID-19. The pandemic has affected all people all around the world, thereby forcing both practitioners and politicians the reality from their perspectives.

The confluence of the need to continue formal education during the COVID-19 while maintaining social distance has pushed education authorities and practitioners to use distance education tools available. Some studies examined the difficulties faced by instructors in delivering distance education courses; however, these studies were mostly carried out at higher education level (Kim & Schniederjans, 2004; Bayram, Deniz & Erdoğan, 2008; Osborn, 2001; Bonk & Cummings, 1998). Similarly, various studies in Turkish literature explored or defined the distance education process in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Keskin & Özer, 2020; Kürtüncü & Kurt, 2020; Durak, Çankaya, & İzmirli, 2020). Unlike these studies, this paper examines the experience of primary school teachers who were obliged to teach the first-grade students at a distance due to the COVID-19 conditions.

Distance education for adults is not a new phenomenon and existing comprehensive studies surrounding the field well define its current stage. However, in recent years, a growing number of distance programs have been aimed at primary and secondary school students. The forces fueling K-12 distance education courses are the national education policies to expand educational opportunities to all students, overcrowding classes, and the exploration of alternative routes for education (Rice, 2006; Sewart, Keegan & Holmberg, 2020).

In the context of primary school education, the experience of first-grade teachers is particularly significant for some reasons. First of all, first grade is critical for students to adapt to the school environment (teachers, students, routines, and so on) and gain basic skills such as how to read and write. Due to the immediate nature of the COVID-19 outbreak, both teachers and parents were unprepared for the new form of education. As it is a mandatory distance education initiative, the new form of education has been named *emergency distance education* in this paper. While teachers had to take a quick step to offer online lessons to continue formal education, parents were needed to be involved in the process to provide their children in first grade with technical support to attend online lessons. Additionally, some of the first-grade students could not find enough time either to adapt to school or gain basic skills. They were also not capable enough to become self-directed learners as expected by the advocates of distance education. Considering all these problems, it seems worth to shed a light on teachers' experiences in emergency distance education.

This study intends to ensure a better understanding of the stages primary school teachers have gone through after finding out that they are expected to offer online courses due to the COVID-19 conditions. The majority of existing articles tend to emphasize the advantages of distance education while minimizing its difficulties (Hara & Kling, 2001). This study intends to arrive at a proper understanding of the phenomenon from the unique perspectives of practitioners.

## METHOD

### Design

This study adopted a phenomenological approach. Researchers in phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). This study attempts to understand the meaning of emergency distance education to primary school teachers teaching first-grade students. Phenomenologists don't know what certain things mean to people they are studying. Researchers act like they don't know what these things mean and study them to find out what is actually taken for granted (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). By embracing this approach, the researcher has defined interactions, weaknesses, strengths, and problems related to emergency distance education considering the study participants. Subsequently, one-to-one interviews were conducted with 10 teachers teaching first-grade students in a private school 3 months after the start of online courses.

The researcher didn't follow a linear, but a zigzagging research process during the interviews. For conducting an empirical research study, Aspens (2009) proposes a zigzagging process including seven steps: define research questions, conduct a preliminary study, choose a theory and use it as a scheme of reference, study first-order (and bracket the theories) and second-order constructs, check for unintended effects, and relate the evidence to the scientific literature.

He also states that a researcher should not allow a theory to guide all the research processes. Empirical data should be utilized to add dimensions to the research in order to construct meaning from all participants' perspectives. In this study, a similar approach has been adopted. First, three research questions were formulated in a preliminary form which was sent to an expert in curriculum and instruction. The expert suggested some minor revisions and the final form included the following research questions.

1. How did teachers feel when they were informed about online lessons?
2. How did teachers prepare for online lessons?
3. What do teachers think about the ongoing online education process?

After conducting preliminary interviews with 2 teachers teaching in a similar context, two more research questions were formulated in line with new dimensions that are adaptation period and suggestions for better online lessons:

4. What did teachers go through during the adaptation period?
5. What suggestions do they offer on how to improve online lessons?

Also, during data collection, the interview questions were constantly updated. The interviews that lasted 26 to 47 minutes were individually conducted via Zoom application. Additionally, they were audio and video-recorded.

After the interviews, first-order constructs entailed meanings the teachers constructed about distance education and how these meanings relate to each other. The final form of the data was then

related to the theories and the results of the existing studies. Consequently, second-order constructs were obtained and presented in the discussion part.

### **Participants and Context of the Study**

The study participants include ten teachers teaching first-grade students in a private primary school in Eskisehir, Turkey. Four of them are the class teachers of first-grade classes in the school and their job experiences range from 17-35 years. Also, one of them was retired from a state school and hired by the private school. The other three class teachers have been teaching in the school for more than ten years. Additionally, two English language teachers, one German language teacher, one music education teacher, one physical education teacher, and one art education teacher participated in the study. Their job experiences range from four to ten years.

All the participants are female and have been experiencing distance education for the first time in their teaching careers. Only the art education teacher had offered online lessons to a university student before, but it is the first time for her to offer online lessons to the first-grade students. Instead of their real names, nicknames assigned to the teachers were used while reporting the results.

Regarding the context of the study, the research was conducted in a private primary school in Eskisehir. Prior to the COVID-19, the first-grade students were offered 9 face-to-face courses a day (45 courses a week) which lasted 45 minutes. The class teachers were teaching Turkish, maths, and life science courses (16 hours a week). There were 13 English language courses (1 course with a native speaker) and other courses (German language, physical education, art education, music education) were conducted either one or two hours a week. With the spread of the COVID-19, the class teachers started teaching 10 courses a week and the English teachers taught 5 courses a week while other teachers conducted 1 course a week in the online setting. The time span of the lessons has been reduced to 30 minutes. Also, the courses have been offered via a distance education tool allowing two-way communication (teacher-student, student-student) and synchronous method has been typically utilized for the courses (Clark, 2020). At the outset of the distance education process, the administrators and technical staff held a meeting to inform teachers about the problems and expectations of distance education and how to use the education tool. Also, the teachers and parents were constantly provided with technical support in case of any problems.

### **Data Analysis**

Inductive approach was used to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the interviews and generate the categories. After the collection of data, the audio records were transcribed verbatim. In the coding stage, the researcher followed 5 steps suggested by Creswell (2014):

1. initial reading of the transcribed texts,
2. identifying specific text segments,
3. labeling the text segments to create categories,
4. reducing overlap and redundancy among the categories,
5. creating a model incorporating the most important categories.

Initially, the data was thoroughly read to obtain a general sense. Subsequently, descriptions or sub-themes and categories were determined in the second and third stages. After the overlap and redundancy among the categories were reduced, the teachers' experiences of emergency distance education were examined in four main stages – first reactions, adaptation period, ongoing process, and suggestions for better distance education.

The member checking technique was used to ensure the validity of the study findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In this process, the data were first analyzed separately for each participant. The researcher prepared a mind map demonstrating the meanings constructed about emergency distance education and how these meanings relate to each other. The mind maps were written in Turkish, as the researcher shared the analysis of the results with the teachers. They were then asked to confirm the results or make corrections in case of misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Two of them requested correction for certain misunderstandings while three of them added some new categories to the existing ones. Other teachers confirmed the analysis of their results and didn't request any change in the categories or sub-categories.

Subsequently, the analyses of all the results were combined to define the distance education process of teachers under the shared categories and sub-categories. This model was examined by an expert in curriculum and instruction in terms of the relevance of the sub-categories to the main ones and the overlap or redundancy among the categories. Lastly, the final model was translated into the English language by the researcher and an expert. The researcher is an ELT (English language teaching) instructor in a foreign language school of a state university and has an M.A degree in ELT. Similarly, the expert is an ELT instructor in a foreign languages school of a state university and has M.A and Ph.D. degrees in ELT.

## RESULTS

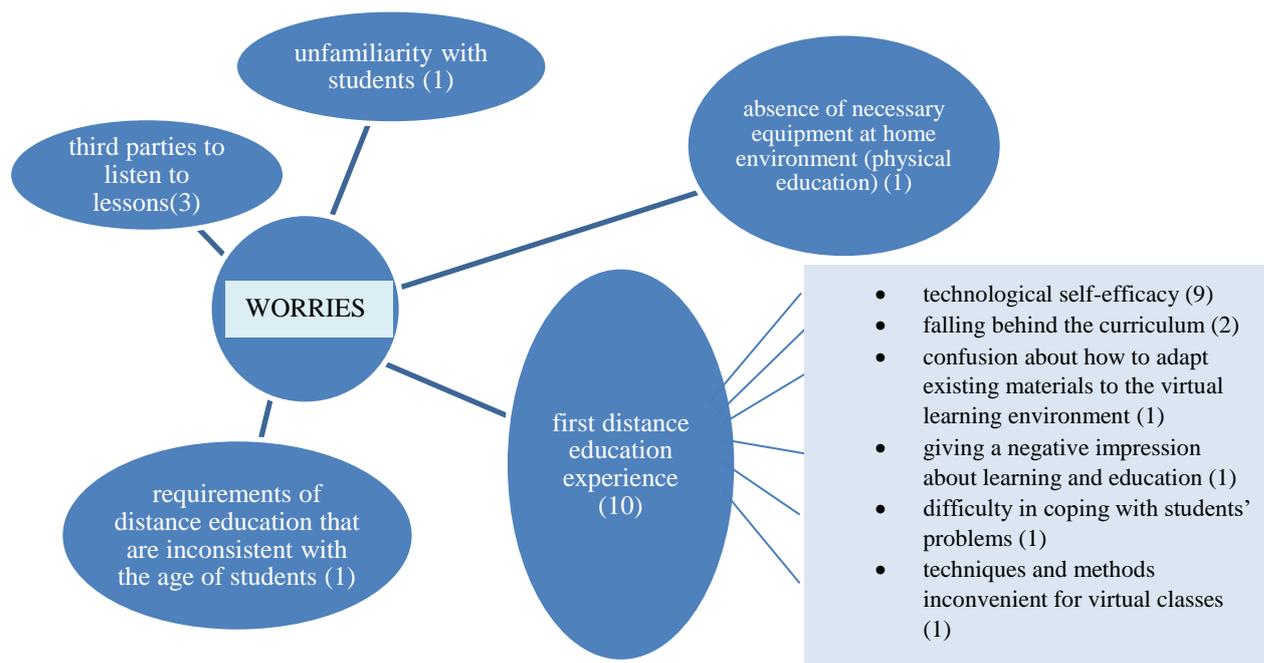
The study results revealed that after realizing that they are obliged to offer lessons in a virtual environment, the primary school teachers teaching the first-grade students have gone through four stages - first reactions, adaptation period, ongoing process, and suggestions for a better distance education process (figure 1).



**Figure 1. Stages the teachers have gone through after being informed about the Emergency Distance Education**

### **Results of the first stage – first reactions**

The teachers experienced feelings of surprise and worry as the first reactions. The factors leading to these feelings are illustrated in figure 1.



**Figure 2. Factors leading to worries about the emergency distance education**

\*Numbers in parentheses show the number of teachers commenting about the –sub-categories.

As illustrated in the figure 2, the primary factor evoking the feeling of worry among the teachers is offering online courses for the first time in their professional teaching career. Thus, all teachers were worried about using the distance education tool (Zoom) effectively and experimenting with the technology more frequently than before, although they had been using computers from before. As they had never offered courses in an online setting before, they were worried about falling behind the curriculum, giving a negative impression about learning and education to the students, or coping with students’ problems.

Beren: *“Our hesitation stems from experiencing something like this for the first time. Something that I never thought of after thirty-four years of experience. But I actually use computer, I like it, but we were afraid as it was the first time, could we be enough for the children? So can we explain the topics as we want? I don't know if we can instill in children the love of lesson and school.”*

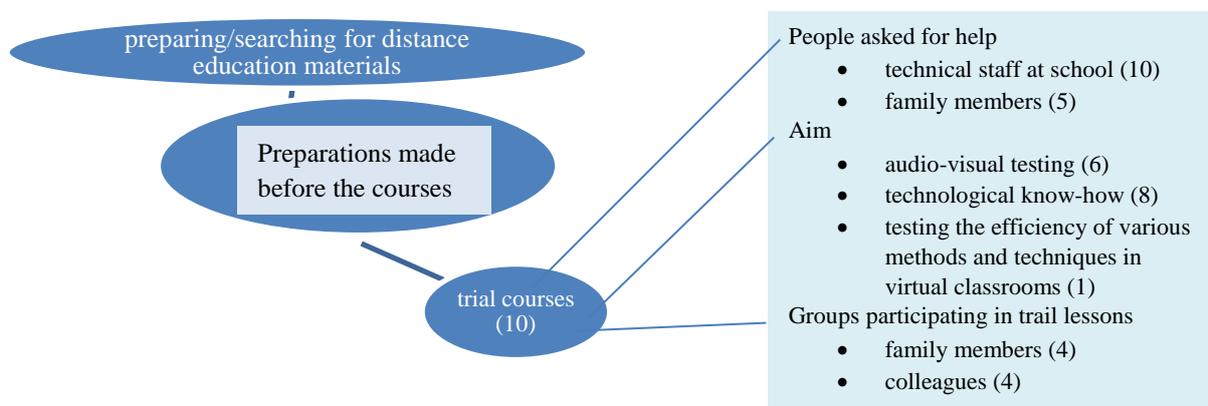
Another aspect that worried the teachers about offering online courses is third parties listening to the lessons. Especially the judgements of parents about the teaching ability or subject matter knowledge of teachers worried them.

Helin: *“We try to talk to the children by simplifying the language at a certain level. If something turns out to be wrong, words, and so on. So what I want to say is, judgment, I mean, if parents think that she can't say this yet or something turns out wrong, I get very excited while teaching and I confess this to my children during lessons. I get excited and say something incorrectly, for example, I will feel very sorry if they think that her proficiency level is really so low.”*

**Results of the second stage – adaptation period**

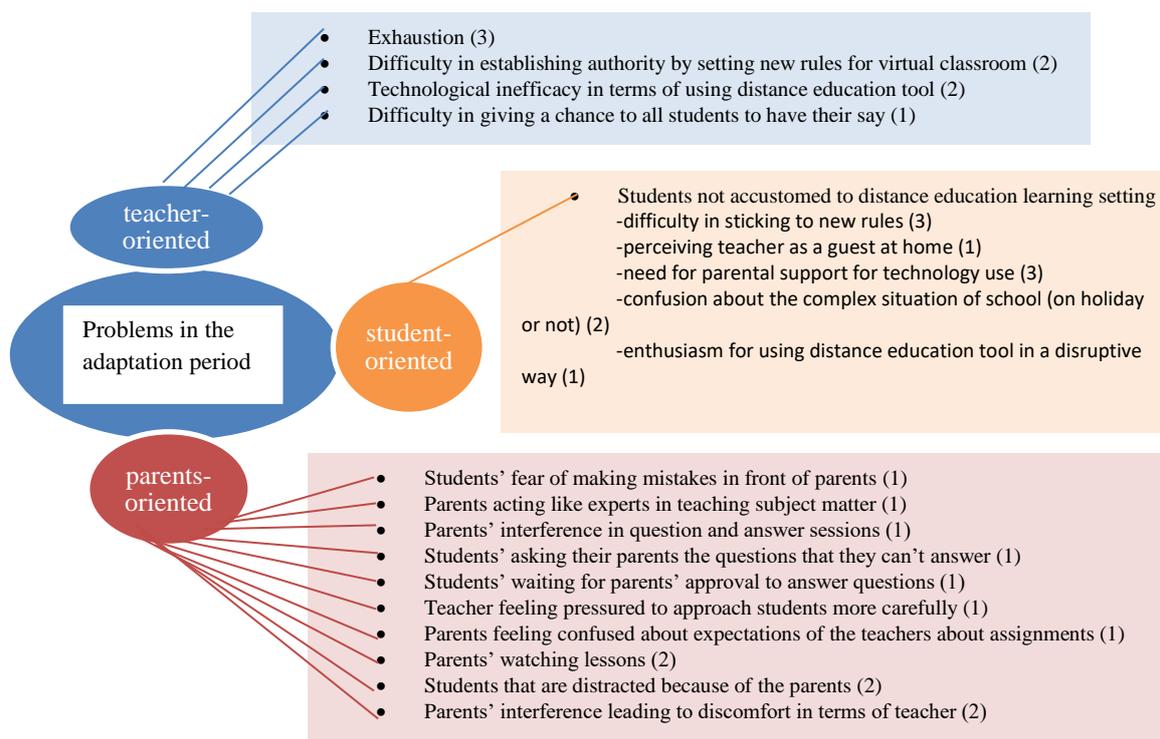
The adaptation period is the second stage the teachers have gone through while teaching during the COVID-19. It entails two main categories – preparations for distance education and

problems encountered in the initial lessons. Teachers' preparations before offering online courses are illustrated in figure 3.



**Figure 3. Teachers' Preparations for Online Courses**

As illustrated in the figure, before offering online courses, teachers searched for/prepared study materials and conducted trial courses to test audio and vision, experiment with the education tool, and check the effectiveness of diverse methods and techniques in an online learning environment. They asked for help from the technical staff or family members who are good at technology. The trial courses were conducted with family members and/or colleagues which helped the teachers feel comfortable with the distance education tool during the initial courses. The second category of the adaptation period is the problems the teachers faced during these courses (figure 4).



**Figure 4. The problems encountered during the adaptation period**

Several problems arose during the adaptation period, as it took time for not only the teachers but also the parents and students to adapt to the recent learning environment, causing the teachers to encounter various problems. However, after this period, those problems were handled effectively and courses continued in a natural mode. As illustrated in the figure 4, teachers felt mentally and

physically exhausted because of stress and long-lasting preparation for the courses. Also, the difficulty in establishing authority in online courses and giving a chance to all students to have their say are among the problems experienced during the adaptation period.

Aycan: *“Distance education is not exactly what I want, but I'm trying different things. If I was at school, why wouldn't I be so tired? Materials at school. I have a lot of ready-made things. I always prepare extra materials, I never felt mentally exhausted, but now I am feeling mentally exhausted. The thought of what I can do. I spend a serious process before each topic. How should I explain this topic?”*

Also, the students were not accustomed to the distance education learning setting. Therefore, they had difficulty in sticking to the new rules during the lessons and using the tool without parental support. Besides, they were confused about whether they were on holiday or not and perceived the teacher as a guest at home. Lastly, they made noises or used the education tool in a disruptive way which distracted their attention from the lessons.

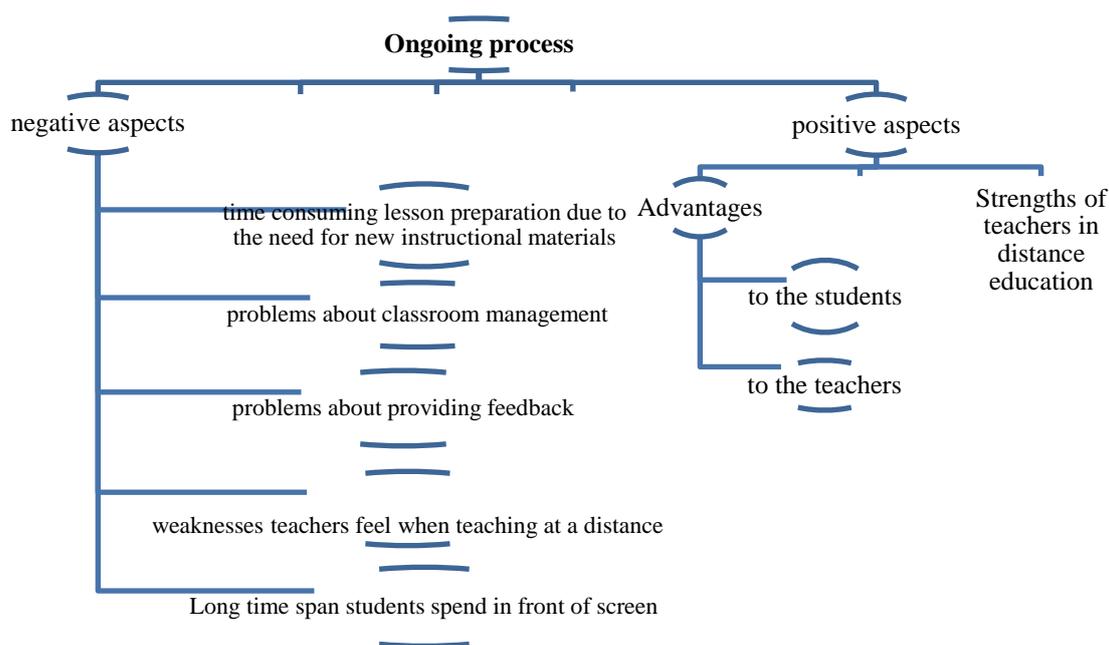
Feray: *“What challenged us at first? At first, the children didn't fully realize that this was a lesson because they were at home, for example, some students took his cat in his arms. He showed that he would play later. I didn't say anything at first, but this time, when one shows it, the next day and the next day, it costs 5/10 minutes every lesson. Then I banned it. I said you can meet, but do not do this during the lessons. They said okay, they perceived it as if I was visiting their home, not as if it was a lesson, the children thought that way. Now they take it a little more seriously, they are aware that they are in the lesson.”*

The teachers also had parent-oriented problems, as the students were at home with their parents during the online lessons.

Helin: *“The parents are at home, they are in the room, maybe, we don't see them, but somewhere they hear us. The children panicked. I was noticing it. They were answering in a panic way. What if I made a mistake, or mom thought my daughter couldn't speak English? Even the most extroverted ones were like this. They've changed now, they've gotten used to online lessons. But they were especially worried at first.”*

### **Results of the third stage – ongoing process**

The ongoing process is the third stage the teachers experienced after starting the online courses. This stage is examined in terms of its positive and negative aspects. The categories and sub-categories of these aspects are demonstrated in figure 5.



**Figure 5. The categories and sub-categories of the third stage – ongoing process**

As demonstrated in the figure 5, the ongoing process is about the negative or positive experiences of teachers regarding the ongoing distance education process. In terms of negative aspects, lesson preparation was found to be time-consuming, which resulted from (1) the need for materials that are convenient for online learning and (2) existing materials which are inconvenient for the home environment. Secondly, teachers encountered problems in classroom management during the online courses due to the following reasons (table 2).

**Table 2. Problems in classroom management**

Disruptive noises (4)	lack of eye contact(6)
Difficulty in controlling students	minimized view of students on screen(4)
	problems about verbal warnings
	offensiveness of warning the same students more than once (4)
	inefficiency of verbal warnings (1)
	offensiveness of verbal warnings (4)
	distracting students' attention from lesson (2)
	overcrowding classes (2)
	parents' existence challenging the teachers' authority(1)
	abundancy of distracting factors at home environment (3)
	necessity to continue the lesson (1)
	difficulty in addressing student differences (1)
	reduced communication due to muting students (3)
Students' problems	difficulty in coping with students' problems
	affective (boredom, demotivation,) (6)
	physical (bleeding, sickness, being physically passive) (3)
	cognitive (about subject matter)(2)
	difficulty in addressing students' problems immediately(3)
Absenteeism(3)	
Reduced lesson time span (30 minutes)(1)	
Audial problems disallowing chorus/group activities(2)	
Difficulty in giving a chance to all students to have their say(1)	

As seen in the table, the participants had some problems in classroom management. First, disruptive noises impeded the flow of lessons. As a result, the teachers frequently muted the students during lessons, which however reduced the communication between student-teacher and student-student. Thus, both muting and unmuting the students were problematic in terms of classroom management.

Feray: *“It's not like in the classroom. Because there are other things in the house that distract the students. His mother doing something, a noise comes from somewhere else. Pets are coming, they are distracted”.*

Secondly, they had difficulty in controlling the students. In relation to the first sub-category, a lack of eye contact was the primary reason for the difficulty in controlling the students. Other significant factors were minimized view of the students on screen, problems about verbal warnings, distracting factors at home environment, and reduced communication due to muting the students.

Aycan: *“I cannot eye-contact with the students or get into verbal communication with each one of them. I cannot approach all the students equally. Those are what tires me most.”*

Concerning the third category, teachers had difficulty in coping with students' problems and addressing them immediately, as they were teaching at a distance.

Nuran: *“A student is raising his finger, I'm moving. I cannot stop. Because if I stop, the lesson will stop and our bodies will cool down as we have to go through a certain course of movement. Therefore, for example, I can't stop the screen, I can't get questions. So I can't get it at that time. For example, a child was sick. I couldn't understand, actually, he tried to explain to me by raising his finger. But I could not get it because I could not stop. When we talked to his parents later, I found out. I was very sorry”*

Other problems regarding classroom management are as follows: absenteeism, reduced lesson time span (30 minutes), audial problems disallowing chorus/group activities, and difficulty in giving a chance to all students to have their say. The second main category of the negative aspects is the problems in providing feedback.

**Table 3. Problems in providing feedback**

Time-consuming process of checking assignments day and night (4)	
A need for cooperation between teacher & parents	parents unable to exercise authority over students (2) parents not sharing teachers' feedback with students (1) parents that can't find time to help students with homework(1)
Difficulty in giving immediate feedback (5)	
Difficulty in providing private feedback (2)	

As seen in the Table 3, the first negative aspect of giving feedback is that the teachers find the process of assignment checking time-consuming. The parents would send photos of the completed assignments to teachers to receive feedback. The assignments could be sent during the day or night, as there was not a definite time to send them, causing the teachers to feel exhausted.

Beren: *“Assignments, I check them and draw a smiling face on pages in the classroom, easier to motivate kids. In an online environment, I still do it but checking homework takes longer. In the classroom, for example, we will check homework, we can take*

22 students' notebooks at the same time and check. But here, it is during the day or night, as they don't come at the same time. I don't like experimenting with technology, but I am always on my phone. When the homework comes, I check it so that I can give feedback, but it starts in the morning at eleven or ten. Time was extended in terms of checking the homework. If we request the parents to send homework at a definite time, they will be stressed. That's why we check it all day long. Homework is sent even at 11 pm. I tolerate the parent, check, and give feedback."

A lack of cooperation from parents is the second difficulty teachers experienced while checking assignments. Checking homework is not effective enough if the parents don't exercise authority over the students, share the teacher's feedback with them, or help them with the assignments.

Aycan: *"The parents need to help in checking assignments. Now, I am trying to check the pictures sent. I can't go too much into detail. Well, sometimes I write comments, but the behavior at home is important over that comment. When I say that you should capitalize this sentence, the family should show this comment to the child and say, "Look, let's correct it, let's capitalize it." Otherwise, my comment and control will be wasted."*

Lastly, teachers had difficulty in giving private and immediate feedback.

Gözen: *"I cannot do everything I have done before in an online setting. Children cannot do it. Because I cannot take children away from the screen and intervene. For example, we are folding something. He says, "mine is not like what you have done." He is probably missing something somehow. I want to take it there and fold it and show it with my hand, but I can't."*

The fourth category of the negative aspects of emergency distance education is weaknesses that the teachers feel when teaching at a distance (table 4).

**Table 4. Weaknesses the teachers feel when teaching at a distance**

Difficulty in improving writing skills of students (3)	
Diminished affective interaction with students	limited opportunities for social chat (6) a lack of encouraging body language (6) limited opportunities for sharing feelings of students (success, joy, sore) (2)
Technological inefficacy (4)	
A lack of school context (3)	

Teachers feel weakness when teaching at a distance, which are the aspects they fail in an online setting. Firstly, the teachers had difficulty in improving the writing skills of the students. As first-grade students in the primary school had just started learning how to write, they needed private and immediate feedback to improve their writing skills. However, since distance education learning settings disallow immediate and private feedback, improving writing skills became one of the weaknesses the teachers feel when teaching at a distance.

Özel: *"I can show kids a visual or play org. But saying them to get notebooks. This is "the treble staff", this is written in the middle. There will be many inaccuracies as I am not exactly applying this in front of the students. I'm not good in this area. In order to do it, the child should be with you so that he does not make a mistake. If he is not with you, it will not*

*be enough, if he opens his notebook and shows it to the cam. Better not to teach than to teach wrong.”*

Diminished affective interaction is the second sub-category related to teachers' weaknesses because they could not find enough opportunities to have social chat with the students. They could neither use encouraging body language such as stroking, hugging, or kissing on the cheek. Also, they had limited opportunities to share their feelings like joy or soreness. Thus, they struggled to ensure affective interaction with the students.

Nuran: *“When we succeed in something together, they are so happy that they come and hug us. We provide that emotional transition and children become happy as they achieve something, but I cannot control this in online lessons. Frankly, I cannot observe how happy the children are.”*

A lack of school context is another weakness of teachers teaching at a distance. School entails social relationships and routines, not just subject-matter knowledge. Whereas, it doesn't seem possible to provide students with a complete school context in distance education settings.

Feray: *“School is not just about teaching. There are not only teachers but also friends in the school. There is a garden. For example, the children love to play on the grass when they have a break. If they cannot go out to the garden even if the weather is cloudy, they feel sorry, so they are very upset. We shouldn't think of school only in terms of education or academically, you know that it is also very good for friends and socializing. In other words, it is a good place to learn the rules of living in society, how to be respectful to each other, what are their responsibilities, and how to fulfill them. If you do something negative, how is the reaction in return, or if you do something positive, how is the reaction? He learns life at school.”*

Some of the teachers also felt technologically weak while teaching in an online environment. They had difficulty in using all features of the education tool, as they were not technologically self-efficient. Even though they were good at using technology, they had difficulty in using the technology for preparing enjoyable lessons in an online environment.

Feray: *“We think we have learned about settings and features of the distance education tool. However, there are still many things we need to learn. I still don't think I am good at using the tool. For example, an update changes something and I don't know what to do in this case.”*

Students spend a long time in front of the screen, which is the last negative aspect of distance education from the participants' perspective. This is because they think spending such a long time in front of the screen is disadvantageous in terms of excessive exposure to technology and physical inactivity, which may cause students to suffer from various diseases, especially eye diseases.

Contrary to the negative aspects, distance education has several positive aspects for both teachers and students. The first positive aspect is the advantages of distance education for teachers (Table 5).

**Table 5. Advantages of emergency distance education for teachers**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more enjoyable lessons thanks to the parents' contributions to lessons (1)</li> <li>• opportunity to know the home environment of the students (2)</li> <li>• distance education experience (4)</li> <li>• awareness about the opportunity of cooperation with different teachers/students free of place (1)</li> </ul>
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Students being at home was seen as a disadvantage in terms of the abundance of factors distracting their attention from the lessons. However, it was assessed as a positive aspect in terms of learning students' characteristic features, relationships with their parents, or the home environment because they behave naturally and feel comfortable at home.

Gözen: *“Online lessons have made a nice contribution to me. I couldn't chat with the kids so much in school. You know, I could talk to them before the breaks, but here, there are a lot of things to see in their home environment, their homes, and how they communicate with their family. I mean, it was nice and I felt that I knew the children more.”*

Although the teachers didn't voluntarily offer online lessons at the outset of the process, it has provided them with the opportunity for experiencing distance education.

Asude: *“Maybe we had to wear it quickly, but after we got out of the shock, we recovered very quickly. I believe something useful happened. It turned into an opportunity. We have teachers even at the age of 65 at our school. This is something difficult for them. For example, getting them quickly involved was very important and valuable because I think it would not be otherwise. I mean, those people wouldn't even have imagined it, but they set up virtual classrooms now, offer online courses, and mute or unmute. Somehow they present educational support to the students with the technological tools. In this sense, it was a good opportunity for professional development.”*

According to the teachers, distance education also has many advantages for the students.

**Table 6. Advantages of emergency distance education for the students**

In terms of technological skills	experimenting with technology (2) adapting to requirements of the technology age at a very early age (1) raising awareness about technology use for learning (1) having self-discipline required by distance education learning settings (2) new learnings as to technology (1)
In terms of continuity of school context	opportunity of coming together with classmates and teachers (1) students appreciating school environment (1) continuity of formal education (3) continuity of student learning (3)

As seen in Table 6, distance education is advantageous in terms of upgrading technological skills of the students.

Feray: *“We have taught many new topics, so they have not fallen behind the curriculum. They have continued to learn. That is important. Also, they have found the opportunity to come together with their teachers and classmates.”*

The last positive aspect of distance education is the teacher's strengths, indicating the aspects the teachers think they have done well during the process (Table 7).

**Table 7. Teacher’s Strengths in the Emergency Distance Education Process**

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encouraging extensive reading (1)</li> <li>• checking assignments (1)</li> <li>• supportive feedback in distance learning setting (1)</li> <li>• well-prepared lesson plans (2)</li> <li>• use of diverse sources during the lessons (1)</li> <li>• trying to respond to both cognitive and affective needs of students (2)</li> <li>• activities that support the active participation of students (1)</li> <li>• giving a chance to all students to have their say (1)</li> <li>• arousing feeling of unity among the students (1)</li> <li>• empathy with the current situation of students (2)</li> </ul>
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**Results of the fourth stage – suggestions for a better distance education process**

As the last stage, the teachers sought ways to improve the courses offered in an online setting, which is called suggestions in this study. The suggestions for increasing the efficiency of online courses are demonstrated in Table 8.

**Table 8. Suggestions for increasing the efficiency of online courses**

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Meticulous preparation for distance education	creating a pool for instructional materials/activities (3) adapting existing materials to distance education learning environment (1)
Increase in affective interaction with students	extra lessons for having social chat with the students (2)
Extra lessons for core subject matters (Turkish, Maths) (3)	
Starting distance education process with a familiar group (2)	
Updating distance education pool so that it allows chorus activities (2)	
Stronger parental support (1)	

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As seen in the table, the teachers came up with some suggestions about the preparations for online courses. As they had to start the online courses quickly, they made suggestions about planning and preparation that entailed creating a convenient activity pool and adapting instructional materials to the online learning setting.

**DISCUSSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study ensures a better understanding of the stages the primary school teachers experienced while teaching first-grade students after finding out that they are expected to offer online courses because of the COVID-19. Although the study has revealed abundant results of distance education, the results related to the adaptation process of the teachers, classroom management, parents’ involvement in the process, and the teachers’ weakness when teaching at a distance are worthy of discussion.

Firstly, it is obvious that all teachers – irrespective of their age or branch – demonstrated similar behavior, surprise, and worry after finding out that they would offer online courses although some of them expressed that they were actually good at using technology. This result is consistent with the results of a previous study that explored the experiences of science teachers during the COVID-19 period (Bakioğlu & Çevik, 2020). However, it is inconsistent with an existing study (Horzum, Albayrak & Ayvaz, 2012) that explored the beliefs of primary school teachers about distance education. According to the researchers, prior technological experience or technological skills of teachers affected their beliefs about the use of technology for education. As younger teachers have a greater tendency to experiment with technology, they are more knowledgeable about recent applications used in distance education. This helped them evaluate the effectiveness of distance

education tools in a realistic way. According to the results of the present study, all participants – regardless of their age – agreed that traditional teaching settings are more efficient and preferable in terms of the students’ learning and conforming to social norms. The difference between these two groups is that the younger ones find distance education effective as an alternative route while their older counterparts perceive it as completely inefficient and problematic.

However, parallel to the results of the study by Horzum, Albayrak, & Ayvaz (2012), the teachers (3 in total) who have been teaching for more than 30 years were more pessimistic about the long- or short-term gains of the students in a distance education setting compared to their colleagues who have up to 20-year experience in the teaching profession.

The difficulties the teachers had in using technology in all four stages demonstrate that technology may become a source of anxiety for teachers offering online courses. The study participants experienced problems in using technology in the adaptation and ongoing education processes. Also, they made suggestions about the use of technology for enjoyable lessons, which is an indicator of high anxiety. These results confirm the results of the two studies (Hara & Kling, 2001, Bonk & Cummings, 1998). In the study by Hara & Kling (2001), technical problems and the absence of personnel to provide technical support were among the sources of distress for both learners and instructors.

The present study also demonstrates that some teachers may not be enthusiastic enough for experimenting with technology, which is consistent with the results of the study by Bonk & Cummings (1998). Technological problems encountered during lessons may be irritating and exhausting for teachers and/or students. Also, some teachers might be unwilling to experiment with technology.

In our case, essential technological devices to offer online lessons had been delivered to the teachers, which didn’t reduce the problems arising from the technology. Teachers and students had difficulty in offering or attending the online courses due to technical problems such as internet connection, a computer with a damaged screen, or a lack of quality computer. The teachers also had difficulty in group/chorus activities as the distance education tool disallows them. Audial problems especially impeded several students to speak at the same time. Thus, it seems technological conditions were not optimized, maybe due to the quick start of emergency distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

Can’s (2020) study proves that for a qualified education process, there is a need for improving the technological infrastructure of distance education applications in Turkey. In distance education, several critical factors need to be reviewed before considering how courses will be presented and function. These factors include audience characteristics and technologies available to audiences and organizations (Shearer, 2003).

Another result parallel to the results of the existing studies is the time-consuming process of checking homework. Teachers generally find the distance education process exhausting due to the need for detailed preparations for lessons and the obligation to check and give feedback for the homework sent during day or night. Similarly, Nolan (1998) states that distance education imposes limitless demands on instructors, so teachers are reluctant to embrace the recent phenomenon.

Regarding the results of classroom management, the researcher evidences that teachers are mostly concerned about reduced or the absence of social interaction. Apparent lack of eye contact and opportunity to give immediate and private feedback, difficulties in addressing the differences between learners, reduced interaction due to muting, or the difficulty in coping with students’ problems could be assessed within the social interaction – a component of the affective domain. Similar concerns are expressed in the related body of literature. One of the greatest concerns surrounding the literature of studies on distance education is the absence of social interaction and its potential harm to younger

students. The perception of student isolation in the virtual environment is one of the drawbacks of distance education (Rice, 2006). Likewise, teachers find the interaction they have with their students in a virtual environment inadequate or limited. They think this causes difficulties in classroom management and coping with the students' problems.

The results about immediate and private feedback are parallel to the results of an existing study that explored the problems adult learners encountered during online courses. The study proved that the lack of prompt feedback from instructors is the major source of anxiety and frustration for students (Hara & Kling, 2001). The concept of feedback is fundamental to the effectiveness of distance education programs as well as traditional ones (Bonk & Cummings, 1998). Consequently, the difficulties in providing feedback in online education settings should be remedied. Bonk & Cummings (1998) recommended e-mails or personal forums for giving private feedback, but phone call remains a better option for the first-grade students as they are not skillful enough to use technology.

Similarly, one of the weaknesses of teachers when teaching at a distance is the loss of social interaction. The results show that the teachers want to share more with their students and perceive the lack of school context that entails relationships and routines as a weakness. Similarly, Garrison (2000) states that despite a great deal of rhetoric about the need to adopt distance education methods, there is a scarce body of literature about creating a viable plan for adopting distance education methods congruent with institutional values and goals. Educators need strategies that meet the needs of their institutions and students when teaching at a distance. Despite the development and use of two-way communication technologies, the present study shows that teachers remain deeply suspicious of reduced social presence at distance education because school is a discourse with routines, social relationships, and rules, and students learn how to conform to them. Thus, distance education tools are unable to overcome these weaknesses (Bozkurt, 2019). For social interaction, mail pals or different channels within the same classroom are recommended by Bonk & Cummings (1998). These recommendations could solve the problems if they are used effectively. They require teachers as well as learners to be skillful technology users, which doesn't seem possible for the students aged 6 or 7 years.

In distance education, control has three dimensions – power, independence, and support. While power refers to the affective state of learners, support refers to parental or organizational support. The dynamic balance between these three factors determines the ultimate success of learners attending courses at a distance (Shearer, 2003). In our case, all requirements related to the dimensions were fulfilled for some students; however, there were problems concerning the dimensions of power and support for others. Absenteeism is a sign of students' demotivation. The parents not sharing the teachers' feedback with the students or not finding time for homework are the indicators of a lack of parental support and they affect the students' learning negatively.

Existing studies may explain why some students did not receive parental support during the COVID-19. According to the results of a study conducted with the parents of kindergarten and primary school students (Lau & Lee, 2020), parents demanded better support from the school as they could not find enough time for their children. Similarly, the results of a study on parents' experiences and struggles during the COVID-19 showed that they had difficulties in balancing responsibilities (Arbe, Ogurlu, Logan & Cook, 2020).

Some people, mostly the advocates of technological utopianism, call the field of researching and developing computer systems that support group activities "computer-supported cooperative work". This definition implies that the group mentioned in this system needs to be cooperative; however, other kinds of social relationships in work groups such as combat and conflict are ignored (Kling, 1994). Similarly, considering the distance education tools as a computer-supported cooperative work, primary school teachers need to cooperate not only with their students but also parents for an effective learning process. The way and the extent of cooperation offered by students during lessons and parents after lessons affect how much primary school, particularly first-grade students, learn from

the teachers at a distance. This is because the parents or/and students might not always give full cooperation.

In this study, the teachers had to mute the students due to discipline problems and disruptive noises that impeded the flow of lessons. On the other hand, muting them is disadvantageous in terms of interaction and it may have evoked the feeling of separation among the learners. The greater the level of interaction, the lower the feeling of separation in distance education (Shearer, 2003). Controversially, one of the weaknesses felt by the teachers was the loss of affective interaction with the students. Dialogue between students and teacher is a significant part of affective interaction and muting the students causes loss of dialogue. This point shows that teachers give priority to subject matter i.e., cognitive domain despite being concerned about the loss of feelings i.e., affective domain. Like cognitive, the affective domain plays a significant role in determining a student's success (Pierre and Oughton, 2007). The teachers don't find the interaction they have with their students meaningful enough and seek other ways such as extra lessons for social chat, which shows that the types of dialogues in distance education settings need to be explored more deeply.

In conclusion, the main concern of educators, particularly the ones teaching at the primary level, is how to support sustained communication. They are worried about losing school routines and interactions that happen at schools, as they are unable to replicate face-to-face interaction by mediated means. The studies exploring the characteristics of spoken and written communication by mediated means will contribute to the development of theories that help teachers understand the use of mediated communication for educational purposes. As Moore (1991) states, the most distant program has low dialogue and a low structure design, while the least distant one has high dialogue and a high structure design.

To view the interaction issue in an online setting from a different perspective, according to prominent defenders of independent learning as well as contributors to the theories of distance education (Garrison, 2000), isolation from the group and determining one's learning route is one of the main characteristics of distance education. Therefore, as long as one could achieve as an independent learner, she/he does not need social interaction. Thus, the question is whether a student aged 6 or 7 years should be allowed to be an independent learner. Maybe, distance education should not be viewed as one-for-all-levels-or-grades. According to Mezirow (1985), no learner is self-directive nor do they want to be, because no learner is completely shut off from the influences of society and learning organizations. The amount of control is critical in distance education because neither too much nor too little structure is appropriate. While the former may force students to drop out, the latter may cause them to get lost and feel confused.

Studies exploring the relationship between personality traits and academic achievement were carried out in distance education environments. However, these studies were conducted with an elder group of students such as junior-level college students (Kim & Schniederjans, 2004), young adult learners (Bayram, Deniz & Erdoğan, 2008), or higher education students (Osborn, 2001, Bonk & Cummings, 1998). The results of these studies demonstrated that the personality traits positively correlated with academic achievement include high ideals, attaching great importance to power, commitment to work and learning orientation, and high motivation. While some of these personality traits may be applicable to primary school students, such traits as high ideals or attaching importance to power, they are impossible to generalize to this group of students. Thus, it is obvious that there is a need for studies that explore how personality traits relate to the academic performance of primary school students. The first question of this relationship is which personality traits necessary to succeed in a web-based learning environment could be expected from primary school students. Another question is whether it is possible to make students gain ideal personality traits at an early age to succeed in distance education settings that will probably dominate the learning activities in the future.

The study results shed a light on the deficiencies of distance education from the practitioners' perspectives. One of the significant implications is that as distance education may substitute for

traditional in-person education due to various reasons, its weaknesses should be discussed. Firstly, Wagner & McCombs (1995) disagree with the common perception that the achievers of distance education are self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and self-efficient. All learners benefit from instruction in which they are motivated and can exercise control over it. Thus, it is appropriate to develop systems that are more likely to serve the needs of all students. Reduced social interaction is the most explicit drawback of distance education. Workshops involving not only practitioners but also administrators and parents could provide better routes to overcome this deficiency.

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