One More Disadvantage: Distance Education Experiences of Immigrant and Refugee Students in the Current Pandemic

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Abstract

The main purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand immigrant and refugee students' distance education experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study group consisted of nine participants, four males and five females, using the snowball sampling method. We prepared a semi structured interview form consisting of ten questions considering the context of the reviewed literature on immigrant and refugee students and COVID-19. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: a) I wish there was no COVID, b) Internet, tablet, zoom and EBA, etc., all about distance education, c) Distance versus face-to-face education, and d) Anti-Socialization or WhatsApp Socialization. Findings from this study suggested that participants were upset, bored, or scared. They could not attend learning activities since they lacked the technical devices and tools critical for two-way interaction. Their relations have mostly broken, and they have experienced socialization gaps with their friends and teachers.

Keywords: *Immigrant and refugee students, Distance education, Pandemic, Experiences, Turkey*

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply affected every aspect of our daily life, including health care, education, and economic systems, and the terms 'social - distancing, lockdown, or closures' have become new routines in daily life (Almanthari et al., 2020). It affected more than one and a half billion students (91.3% of total enrolled learners) in 188 countries and brought up some radical changes in traditional education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). Terms such as "*online teaching, distance education, and home-schooling*" have taken the place of traditional face-to-face education (Toquero, 2020).

Distance Education and the COVID-19 Pandemic

From the very early days, schools did not have time for a smooth change since that transition was unexpected (Kaur, 2020), and some limitations, such as a lack of technology and a poor economy, have also prevented countries from adapting to the current situation quickly and easily (Zhong, 2020). Online teaching activities have been conducted via Zoom, Skype, Facetime, etc. All these platforms need advanced technology and improved human resources. Another critical issue is that classroom socialization is also vital for students' personal development, as emphasized by 21. Century Skills movement (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008, [P21]). During that period, students experienced a major loss of classroom socialization, and they had to communicate with their friends mostly via digital platforms and could not benefit from the real-time exchange of ideas and interaction (Britt, 2006).

Another obstacle is that some students had to share technical devices and tools with other family members, which has resulted in missing some online classes and caused learning deficiencies (The Trade Union Advisory Committee [TUAC], 2020). The worst part was that the crises were not equally distributed. The pandemic has similarly affected all people regardless of their country, income, gender, or nationality, but vulnerable and disadvantaged groups were affected more severely (Schleicher, 2020). Students of high socioeconomic status (SES) have been able to find alternative ways to benefit from distance education opportunities. However, those from families with relatively low-income and vulnerable groups did not have the opportunity to find alternative ways to keep on learning appropriately and are now at risk of being left behind. Approximately 60 percent of distance education is conducted on online platforms, but 47 percent of students cannot access the internet in their homes (World Bank, 2020). These students had the worst schooling access opportunities, high dropout rates, and learning deficits even before the pandemic (World Bank, 2018). School closures with COVID-19 have made all these problems worse for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

From the first confirmed case in the country, as in many other countries, Turkey has taken some precautions against the pandemic. The closures, social distancing measures, and lockdowns have been on the agenda in daily life. The Turkish government has provided online and offline education services for students during the pandemic. Teachers have conducted online education activities, and students have watched television broadcasts about their courses on the channel TRT *(Turkish Radio and Television)* in addition to EBA *(a digital content platform established by the Ministry of National Education in which students can find online course materials),* Zoom, Google meeting, and WhatsApp. The Ministry of Education has also provided offline

course materials such as free course books and some other course materials. Online and offline education materials are not enough, as some students, especially those living in rural areas, do not have proper internet access and other necessary tools (Whang et al., 2020). In addition to those students living in rural areas, some disadvantaged and vulnerable students who have migrated to Turkey with their families cannot benefit from distance education properly. This study mainly focused on refugee students living in Turkey who have faced one more disadvantage within the distance education process.

An overview of immigrant students in Turkey
Many people from Middle East countries have come to Turkey as they ran away from wars and other threats. Turkey has been one of the popular choices for these people due to its geographical location, and cultural and religious proximities. These people have mostly come from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, etc., and they are in 'temporary international protection' status (Grand National Assembly of Turkey [GNAT], 1961). The numbers of immigrants and refugees in Turkey are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Numbers of immigrants and refugees in Turkey.

Country of origin	Number of Persons of Concern (as of August 31, 2019)	%
Syria	3.600.000	90.0
Afghanistan	170.000	4.25
Iraq	142.000	3.55
Iran	39.000	0.98
Somalia	5.700	0.15
Other Nationalities	43.300	1.07
Total	4.000.000	100

Source: UNHCR (2021)

The common feature of these countries is that they have been struggling with poverty, war, hunger, and the inadequacy of water, food, security, and education services for many years. People generally tend to leave their countries in search of a better life, security, and proper education services (Geyik, 2018; Selvitopu & Gun, 2020). Turkey has been one of the first choices for most of them due to its cultural and religious ties with these countries. After coming to Turkey, they may face some obstacles, such as poverty, poor housing, communication and adaptation problems, language barriers, discrimination, and prejudicial treatment. These difficulties have resulted in problems with adjustment, acculturation, communication, and adapting to the new environment (Ding, 2016; Freeman & Li, 2019; Glass and Westmont, 2014; Selvitopu, 2020). In the adaptation and change process, they have to cope with isolation, cultural loneliness, and a sense of conflict. One of the main reasons for these problems is the lack of host language proficiency. According to the results of some studies on this topic, language barrier problems of these students affect their academic performance negatively, and this sense of failure causes undesirable results for their adaptation process (Foley, 2010; Myrna, 2016; Sawir, 2005; Schleicher, 2015). Rienties & Tempelaar (2013) found that due to adaptation problems, immigrant students obtain lower grades than native students. Lack of host language proficiency

and feeling insecure about their communication skills also result in cultural loneliness and isolation, as these students are mostly afraid of having a close relationship with native children and meaningful interactions with them (Benyamin, 2018; Interiano, & Lim, 2018; Nayar-Bhalerao, 2014). In addition to all these problems, they have faced one more disadvantage with the current pandemic, which has made their lives harder.

The Current Study

This phenomenological study is an attempt to understand the distance education experiences of disadvantaged students and to attract more attention to their situation, which has worsened during the pandemic. The main purpose of this study is to understand immigrant and refugee students' distance education experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

The main purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand immigrant and refugee students' distance education experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants shared their lived experiences and stories in a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). It also helps researchers search for the essential or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness, where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the purpose of this study is to explore and understand the distance education experiences of immigrant students, a phenomenological approach would be the most appropriate design for understanding the lived distance education experiences of immigrant students living in Turkey during the pandemic.

Participants

The study group consisted of nine participants, four males and five females, using the snowball sampling method. The researchers first contacted a headmaster of a middle school and gave him some information about the study. Then, the headmaster called one of the immigrant students and asked whether he wanted to join the study. The first volunteer participant was Agah. As Patton (1987) stated, the researcher asked the first person a question such as *"Can you recommend someone to talk about that issue?"*. Then, with his and other participants' help, the study group consisted of nine participants. All participants were from four different middle schools. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to ensure their anonymity. Participants were between the ages of 11-13, and they were attending four different middle schools. These schools are located in a middle-income neighborhood, which means that not only immigrant students but also native students have had some disadvantages during the pandemic. The government provided free tablets to approximately five percent of the students at each school without considering gender, nationality, or age group. There are a few local internet cafes, but they are not free, and those pupils cannot afford to use them. Table 2 presents the short stories of the participants.

Table 2.

Short stories of participants

Agah	He is from Iraq and has been in Turkey for 7 years. He is in the sixth grade and the only child in his family. His father died in 2013 and his mother is a housewife. He lives with his mother, uncle, his grandfather, and grandmother. He is interested in drawing pictures and he is a bookworm.
Nandy	She is from Iran and has been in Turkey for 5 years. She is in sixth grade. She has a brother and a sister. Her mother is a housewife. Her father sometimes finds a chance to work at a factory when the boss calls him. She usually takes care of her little sister.
Maher	He is from Syria and has been in Turkey for 3 years. He is in the sixth grade and he is one of the six children in his family. His two older brothers go to high school. He can't speak Turkish very well.
Rokan	She is from Iraq and has been in Turkey for six years. She is in the sixth grade and she has four siblings. Her father doesn't have a proper job and her mother is a housewife. She has diabetes so she is afraid of catching an illness, especially Corona. She speaks Turkish very well.
Najib	He is from Afghanistan and has been in Turkey for 5 years. He is in the sixth grade and he is hardworking. His favorite class is English and he wants to be a footballer. His mother is a housewife and his father is a garbage collector.
Dia	She is from Syria and has been in Turkey for 8 years. She is in the eighth grade. Her father works in construction and her mother is a housewife. She usually helps her mother at home.
Manan	She is from Afghanistan and has been in Turkey for five years. She has four sisters. Her mother is a housewife and her father does not have a proper job.
Izar	She is from Syria and has been in Turkey for 5 years. She is in the seventh grade. Her father is a worker and her mother is a housewife. She has difficulty in language classes and she likes drawing.
Ramin	He is from Afghanistan and has been in Turkey for 4 years. He has 3 brothers and one sister. His father works at a factory and his mother is a housewife. He wants to be a footballer and he attends Taekwondo courses. His favorite classes are English and social studies.

Data Collection

As the major source to collect data for our qualitative study (Merriam, 2009), we prepared a semi structured interview form consisting of ten questions considering the context of reviewed immigrant students and COVID-19 literature. The questions included issues such as socioeconomic status, class activities, socialization, communication, and class attendance to better understand the distance education experiences of participants. As the pandemic precautions were considered, we interviewed our participants regrettably via cell phones, which also limited our interview duration. Even so, each interview lasted from 15 to 20 minutes and was audio-recorded. We also considered data saturation by continuing interviews until we believed that interviews would not offer any further significant opinions and newer insight into the phenomena for the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). We transcribed the interviews and asked participants to check and confirm their expressions via cell phone again to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. That process took a lot of time since many of the participants do not have cell phones on their own and we had to contact their parents at different times.

Data Analysis

Making coherent arrangements is critical since data collection and analysis are interrelated processes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). To discover emerging themes from the data, we applied an inductive content analysis approach (Patton, 2002). As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggested, we followed six steps to analyze and interpret the data. First, we read all the transcriptions with audio recording simultaneously and put them into the NVivo 11 package program to create initial codes and make patterns visible. Then, we highlighted remarkable parts of the text and divided them into smaller parts to find patterns. The program allowed us to organize codes, subthemes, and themes by seeking connections across them in the fourth step. For member checking, two experts were invited to check the codes and themes generated. Then, we typed the list of themes and formed categories, which were clustered around themes corresponding to the literature review and the research purpose. We used quotations reflecting the experiences of participants to help readers understand the whole context.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative studies is critical. We considered peer debriefing, respondent validation (Creswell, 1998), and triangulation (Maxwell, 2005, Merriam, 2009) for higher trustworthiness. We invited two experts to observe all the steps and give feedback on the progress of the study as peer debriefing. Respondent validation is an effective way of preventing misinterpretations of the participants' phrases and identifying the perspective they have on the subject (Maxwell, 2005). To ensure respondent validation, the researcher asked participants to check and confirm their expressions on the issues interviewed via phone after the transcription of the interviews. Data triangulation can be achieved by collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings using a variety of methods (Maxwell, 2005). Participants in this study were selected purposively and had different backgrounds to provide data triangulation. Bracketing is also critical to understanding a phenomenon in its context; it helps the researcher be more aware of his/her biased perspective, which may influence the research findings (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, the best quotations were chosen to reflect the lived experiences of participants without breaking them into smaller parts to help readers understand the whole context.

Findings

Four themes emerged from the data: a) I wish there was no COVID, b) Internet, tablet, zoom and EBA, etc., all about distance education, c) Distance versus face-to-face education, and d) Anti-Socialization or WhatsApp Socialization. The themes also include some subthemes that helped readers better understand the context of the study.

I wish there was no COVID. From the first confirmed case, the pandemic profoundly affected daily life, including health care systems, educational practices, and economic systems. It has also affected education practices deeply, and school closures have been on the agenda all around the world to overcome the difficulties of the pandemic. Students had to stay at home, and they were upset, bored, or scared.

> I feel upset and bad. I wish there was not COVID. I cannot see my friends, my teachers. I cannot go out, and I am afraid of getting COVID-19 (Rokan).

Ramin also mentioned similar feelings about school closure.

> With one word, I feel sad. I did not know that Covid was that dangerous. At first, I did not feel that bad. I thought that they would reopen schools after a few days. However, they did not. I felt bad when I realized that schools were not going to reopen in a short time (Ramin).

As seen in quotations, students were upset and felt bad when they realized that they had to keep apart from their teachers, schools, and friends for an uncertain while. They also know how COVID-19 is dangerous, and they are afraid of getting the virus. The scary virus brought them fear, boredom, and anomie in addition to their few social and economic resources. Participants' family income is low since their parents earn a living with daily work if they are lucky to find it.

It was boring. It is a well-known fact that school life forms a large part of children's daily life, and they spend most of their time at school. They also spend time with their friends not only at school but also after school. They hang out with their friends and play outdoor games. School closure practices prevented children from all these activities and the games they play together. These activities are directly and positively associated with children's mental and physical well-being (Wen et al., 2009). As a result of school closure practices, children find themselves in deep boredom. They shared their feelings with the words below:

> I love spending time at school more. I am bored at home because I can't see my friends and spend time with them. I want schools to reopen and go to school (Izar).

Agah also experienced similar feelings, but he predicted what would happen if schools reopened.

> The last year is 'boring', with one word. I am bored at home, and I read the book at home and draw pictures. However, we cannot do anything with our friends because there is COVID, and it is dangerous to reopen schools as the case numbers can go up again (Agah).

As students are used to spending most of their time at school, they are bored at home and trying to find new ways, but it is obvious that they are not satisfied with this new lifestyle.

I missed everything. Students spent most of their time with their friends before the pandemic. Because of lockdown and school closures, they have felt bored at home and have missed their friends, teachers, and schools. Nandy has shared her feelings with the following words:

> It is truly bad to stay away from my friends. I missed everything. I cannot go out now and take fresh air. I cannot see my friends and teachers. I missed them. There is nothing positive about this period. I am truly sad (Nandy).

Rokan also emphasized that she had spent more time with her friends before COVID.

> I missed my friends more now because I had met them more before COVID-19, and we spent time together; we played games and walked around. I did not like anything about this one year. I love my school so much, and I missed going to school (Rokan).

School closures and lockdown practices resulted in spending more time at home, and students could not come together with their friends. As an expected result of all these practices, students felt bored at home and missed their old habits, especially spending time with their friends. The quotations are full of depressed feelings, as they lack many things to do before COVID-19.

A New Daily Routine for Me. The pandemic has brought up a new lifestyle and daily routine for everyone. For instance, students now have to spend most of their time at home instead of at school. This means that the main activities of students changed after COVID-19. As their parents have to work, the burden on children at home has increased recently. Before the pandemic, they were at school most of the day. However, now they are at home all day and they have to help their parents and they also have to do housework when their parents are not at home.

> I help my mom at home. I help her while she is cooking. I set the table. I also attend my distance courses and have breakfast before attending them. I do my homework and read the book. I draw pictures. I am capable of drawing pictures (Agah).

Nandy seems to have more responsibilities than others, as she also has to take care of her little sister when her parents are not at home.

> My mother is a housewife, and my father works at a factory. My mother also sometimes works. I have a baby sister, and I take care of her when my parents go to work. My brother also takes care of him. I clean the house and help my mum in the kitchen (Nandy).

Sharing housework and helping parents are critical factors that help children develop a positive personality. Here, the students are helping since they got bored of not going out to school, playing games, or meeting friends.

Internet, tablet, zoom and EBA, etc.; all about distance education

As students cannot go to school, they have to attend their courses via distance education applications. Teachers have taught the lectures via Zoom and have also used WhatsApp or other platforms for assigning homework. Students have benefited from distance education opportunities via tablets, smartphones, computers, etc. They also used EBA or TV broadcasts to learn their subjects. Technically, this is correct, but they also have some problems.

I can but not always. Not all immigrant students have equal chances of using these platforms to follow their courses. Some of them do not have the necessary equipment or tools, and they have shared their experiences in the following words:

> We have an internet connection at home, and I can attend distance courses regularly. I sometimes watch courses on TV. We have a tablet and computer at home. I attend courses using my tablet, as our computer cannot run ZOOM. I know about EBA, and I benefit from it. I study courses and do the activities on EBA (Maher).

Another participant described her experience as follows:

> We don't have an internet connection at home. I sometimes attend courses using my mother's telephone and her telephone's mobile data. I cannot attend online courses as we do not have a proper internet connection. I know about EBA, but I cannot use it often. We don't have a computer or tablet. I sometimes try to use EBA, but I cannot. I study my courses from the books the Ministry of Education has provided us. I can speak and understand Turkish, but I can't understand the subjects in the books (Manan).

Even though Rokan seems to have relatively better opportunities, it is clear that she also has some problems with attending online courses.

> We have an internet connection at home. We have a computer and telephone at home. I can attend courses but not always because there is usually an internet connection problem.

> Sometimes there is no problem, but sometimes we have 2-3 connection problems in a day (Rokan).

As seen in their words, some of them do not have the necessary equipment and internet connection to follow online courses, which will cause learning deficiencies, especially for immigrant students since they have low income. As they cannot benefit from distance education opportunities, they use their course books. However, the course books cannot provide necessary benefits without teacher instruction and guidance.

I must share my tablet. Another situation is that some students have equipment at home, but this is not enough for them to follow courses as they have brothers and sisters. Our participants are the children of the disadvantaged group and come from low-income families, and their families cannot afford to buy a tablet, computer, or smartphone for each. Therefore, they have to share the tool they have at home to attend online courses or do homework and study on online platforms.

> We have an internet connection at our home, and that is my mother's mobile data. We have one telephone, but there are five people at home, so I cannot attend online courses. We all have to use only one smartphone. My brother goes to first class at primary school, so he attends his online classes via that smartphone. As a result, I cannot join my classes or rarely can join (Maher).

Dia also has similar problems, and he has to share his computer at home. He cannot attend online courses regularly.

> We have an internet connection at home, and I try to attend online courses, but I cannot attend all the courses. We have a computer at home, but my brother has to use it. He uses a computer to attend courses so I cannot join courses (Dia).

As it can be understood from what they said, although they have an internet connection and even some devices, it is a fact that they cannot benefit from distance education activities properly because they have to share all these with their siblings at home. This is the evidence that shows one more disadvantage for immigrant students.

Distance versus face-to-face education

Students are not happy with distance education. They all know Turkish to some degree, but this is not enough for them to understand their teachers during online courses because they cannot see their teachers' gestures as they do in the classroom. They also have less chance to ask more questions to their teachers in the classroom when they do not understand. In addition to certain communication problems, they also face some technical problems.

I find English courses harder because I cannot understand my teachers during online courses. I know Arabic and Turkish, but this is not enough. I could ask questions in the classroom, but I cannot now (Izar).

Ramin also has difficulties in understanding courses related to the medium of instruction problems.

> I cannot understand online courses because I cannot ask questions during online courses. However, I could ask questions in the classroom before COVID. Although I can speak Turkish, I cannot understand everything. Sometimes my microphone does not work. I love English courses more because I can understand them better (Ramin).

Face-to-face is better. Language is one of the most important tools for effective communication and the most necessary tool for meaningful learning. Participants had some language problems even before distance education, but they could better understand the classroom via direct communication. However, now, without seeing their teachers they have difficulties understanding the courses.

> To me, face-to-face education is better because all students cannot join online courses, and we can see our teachers and friends at school. Some of the children do not have a computer or internet connection. In online education, I cannot hear teachers very well. I can speak Turkish well, but I have difficulty understanding Turkish lessons. I could understand better in the classroom (Rokan).

Najib also thinks that face-to-face education is better than distance education.

> Online education is worse than face-to-face education because teachers can explain everything in the classroom better. The duration of online courses is too short and not enough. The lesson finishes when the teacher is explaining something or in the middle of a course (Najib).

Students think that face-to-face education is better and they have difficulties understanding courses. Language barriers are the main problem in this situation in addition to some technical problems.

They do not know Turkish. Students can speak Turkish better than their parents, as they have more opportunities to practice Turkish at school with their friends. Since their parents cannot speak and understand Turkish very well, they cannot help their children with courses and assigned homework at home.

> I could ask questions to my teachers when I do not understand in the classroom, but I cannot ask questions about courses now at home. My parents cannot help me. They do not know Turkish, and they do not know about my lessons. (Najib)

Dia and Ramin have also mentioned similar problems they have faced at their home.

> My parents cannot help me because they do not know Turkish very well. They do not know about our courses as they did not go to school. (Dia)

> I sometimes have problems doing homework, but my parents cannot help me because they do not know Turkish very well. (Ramin)

Effective parental support and involvement have an important effect on children's success and having a desired personal development (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). However, participant students cannot get help from their parents to minimize the negative effect of distance education, as their parents cannot speak Turkish very well. In addition to the negative effects of distance education, this situation makes things worse for them. Participants also lack practising Turkish at school now, and this is also an important disadvantage for them.

Anti-Socialization or WhatsApp Socialization

Socialization is very important for human nature and is an essential need for a child's development. However, with school closure practices and lockdown, children are now devoid of socialization. They cannot see their friends and play games with them.

Long time, no see. School is very important for children, as they can socialize with their teachers and friends at school and after school. However, now, they cannot socialize and cannot play games with their friends.

> I miss my friends and teachers most about school. I cannot see my friends now because I cannot go out now. I don't have a telephone. My parents have it, but they take it with them while going to work. There is no more. I cannot use my mother's phone because she comes home late (Nandy).

Najib also stated that he could not attend his taekwondo and football courses because of the pandemic.

> I used to attend taekwondo courses, and we used to play football together, but I cannot go out now and meet my friends. I used to go out very often and meet my friends before COVID but now I cannot (Najib).

Participants have not seen their friends for a long time and socialize with their friends. They cannot also attend extracurricular courses that schools offer. All these negative conditions may have an undesirable effect on children's socialization and personal development and may also bring anti-socialization processes.

WhatsApp socialization. Socialization plays a critical role in children's development and is a need for healthy personal development (Nurmi, 2004). Schools are very important places for students, as they can socialize with their friends there. However, they cannot socialize with their friends at school and after school now. As socialization is a need for children, they have found some ways to meet this need for a degree. Using WhatsApp is one of these ways for students to socialize and keep in touch with their friends.

> I learned Turkish by reading a book and talking with my friends, but now I cannot meet them. I am also diabetic, and I am afraid of going out and meeting them. I talk with my friends via WhatsApp. We talk about courses and our daily life. My teachers also send me my homework via WhatsApp, and I send them back when I complete them (Rokan).

Manan also stated that she uses WhatsApp to socialize with her friends.

> I used to play games and spend time with my friends before COVID, but now I rarely meet them in our neighborhood. Now I use WhatsApp to keep in touch with my friends and teachers. Sometimes my teachers send me homework on WhatsApp, and I study them (Manan).

As seen in their quotations, socialization is a need for them, and students benefit from the technology to close the socialization gap. However, the main question seems to what extent it is satisfactory or not.

Discussion

The number of immigrant and refugee students in Turkey has dramatically risen in the last decade, and researchers have focused on the difficulties that immigrants and refugees have faced and their needs and experiences. Studies have shown that immigrant and refugee students deal

with poverty, linguistic barriers, accommodation problems, insufficient parental support, etc. (Fortuniy et al., 2009; Freeman & Li, 2019; Yavcan & El-Ghali, 2017; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In addition to those challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought one more disadvantage with distance education for those children who have to live far away from their hometowns. As they have significant obstacles even in classrooms, such as a sense of conflict, cultural loneliness, and isolation (Aras & Yasun, 2016; Capps, et al., 2002; Schleicher, 2015), they now have to cope with the inequalities brought by distance education.

The WHO (2020) declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic on March 11th, 2020 and starting from the early days, the pandemic deeply affected every part of our daily life. In addition to social distancing and lockdown practices, governments have also closed down schools as a part of pandemic precautions. The outcomes of those precautions have affected students all around the world, but the disadvantaged ones who have immigrant and refugee backgrounds are probably the most affected students during that process. This phenomenological study is an attempt to understand the distance education experiences of disadvantaged students and to attract more attention to their situation, which has worsened during the pandemic. The findings of the study were categorized into four themes: a) I wish there was no COVID, b) Internet, tablet, zoom, and EBA, etc., all about distance education, c) Distance versus face-to-face education, d) Anti-Socialization or WhatsApp Socialization.

The first theme is generally about the emotional situations of the participants. They mentioned that they are not happy and deeply bored at home, as they have to stay at home all day during the pandemic and cannot go to school. School forms a large part of children's daily life, and they spend most of their time at school and after school with their friends. Now, they cannot go to school and interact with their teachers and friends and cannot play games. All activities and interactions are critical for children's mental and physical well-being (Jensen, 2007; Lee, 2020; Wen et al., 2009). Studies that investigated psychological symptoms of the pandemic also showed that children are more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety during and after school closures (Loades, et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Participants also stated that they have missed their friends, teachers, and their old habits. Going to school is crucial, especially for immigrant and refugee students, since they live in a new culture and environment and have less chance to socialize than their peers. The pandemic brought them one more disadvantage by eliminating that chance. On the other hand, staying at home has also given students new responsibilities. Some of them have to take care of their baby siblings while others have to help their parents with household chores. All these responsibilities seem to be a barrier for students to spend more time studying. Helping their parents and sharing responsibilities might be beneficial for students to develop a positive personality, but an overload of household chores may prevent students from learning tasks.

Another challenge participants faced during the pandemic was the lack of necessary equipment to attend online courses. With school closures, students have to take their courses online, and teachers have used online platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, or other online platforms to teach and assign homework. Students need equipment and internet connections to participate in distance courses and do their assigned homework. However, our participants stated that they could not attend online courses regularly, as they did not have the necessary equipment and

proper internet connection or had to share the equipment with their siblings at home. Considering that they mostly come from low-income families, it is difficult for their parents to provide the necessary equipment. They have course books, but they cannot make use of these books, since the books are in Turkish, and some of our participants also have difficulties in understanding Turkish. They need special guidance to understand course books at home. However, their parents also do not know Turkish very well, and they cannot help their children with their courses or homework. Many studies show that parental support is critical for students' academic achievement, especially in such a pandemic period that it becomes vital (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Garbe, et al., 2020; Henderson, 2021). Lacking adequate online learning materials, internet connections, parental support, and coming from low-income families have clearly shown that all these obstacles and crises are not equally distributed. The pandemic has affected people regardless of their country, income, gender, or nationality, but this does not apply to the consequences of the pandemic that affect vulnerable and disadvantageous people, such as our participants (Schleicher, 2020).

Participants were not happy with distance education because they had more challenges, such as language barriers, a lack of following teachers' gestures and mimics, and less interaction. Language is one of the most critical tools for effective communication and meaningful learning (Sharan, 2015). Our participants already had communication problems before the pandemic (Aydin & Kaya, 2017), and this problem worsened during the pandemic. As the best way to learn a new language is by practicing it in real-life circumstances or through face-to-face education (Roth et al., 2010), the pandemic has taken that chance from our participants for almost one year. Another challenge is the lack of following and understanding of teachers' gestures during online learning activities. Studies investigating the influence of teachers' gestures on student learning show that teachers' gestures can facilitate student learning, and they may play an important role in instructional communication (Alibali, & Nathan, 2007; Valenzeno et al., 2003; Yeo, et al., 2017). Understanding gestures is difficult for our participants even in face-to-face education, since they come from different cultures. Now, it is almost impossible for them to understand and respond to their teachers via distance education platforms.

The last and perhaps the most critical disadvantage is the lack of socialization chances, which is critical for immigrant and refugee students in adaptation, adjustment, and acculturation processes. Participants have not seen their friends for a long time and have no chance for face-to-face conversational contact with them. They also cannot attend extracurricular courses in the schools that offer them to spend time with their friends and doing activities together. These collaborative activities are vital for children's mental well-being and developing a positive personality (Schieffelin, 1990; Staub, 2013). Additionally, the potential of classmates as socialization agents to help promote cultural belonging, as well as the positive adjustment of immigrant and refugee students in the school context, is also important (Vietze et al., 2019). During the pandemic, they cannot interact with anyone from their peers, and this is a great barrier to their socialization process. Many of them are trying hard to breakdown that barrier by using alternative ways, such as WhatsApp or other social media platforms. However, we surely know that this type of communication will certainly not replace real-life interaction, as our participants emphasized, and cannot and perhaps will not close the socialization gap.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal the distance education experiences of immigrant and refugee students living in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is an attempt to understand the distance education experiences of disadvantaged students and to attract more attention to their situation, which has worsened during the pandemic. Students mentioned that they are not happy and deeply bored, as they have to stay at home all day during the pandemic. Lack of adequate online learning materials, internet connection, parental support, and coming from low-income families are also the typical characteristics of our participants. They are not happy with distance education because they have more challenges, such as language barriers, a lack of following teachers' gestures and mimics, and less interaction. They also lack socialization opportunities, which are critical for immigrant and refugee students in adaptation, adjustment, and acculturation processes. All these experiences clearly show that participants are more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety in the course of COVID times.

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