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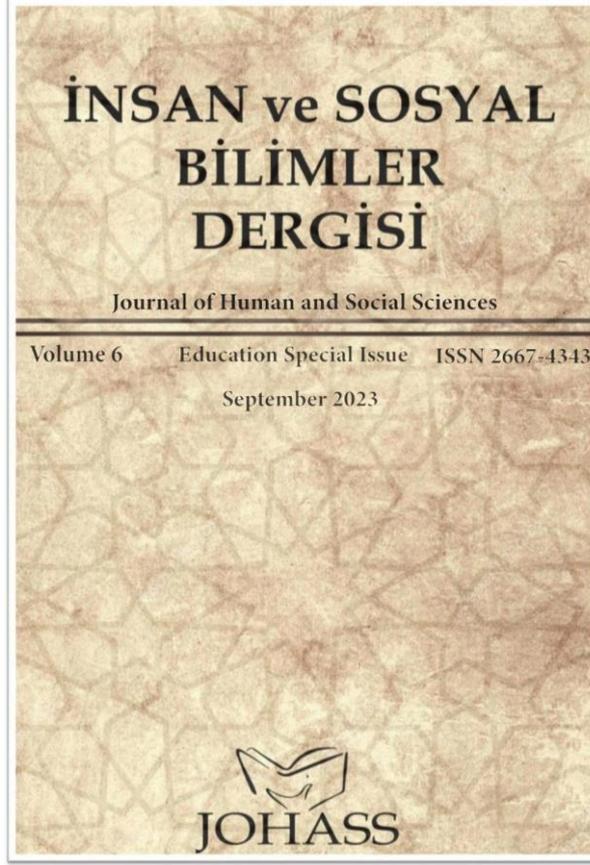
Problems Encountered in Distance Initial Literacy Teaching During the Pandemic Period (Covid-19)

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Abstract	Research Article

This study aims to examine the problems encountered in the period of distance initial literacy teaching during the pandemic based on the first-grade primary school teachers' opinions. In this qualitative study, data were collected through the interview technique. The study group of the study was determined by the criterion sampling method. The study group consist of 11 classroom teachers who taught initial literacy teaching during pandemic period. The data were analyzed by content analysis using Maxqda software. The results of this study show that problems encountered in the distance initial literacy teaching during the pandemic period were grouped under three themes: "Technology", "Interaction," and "Initial Literacy Teaching Process". According to the opinions of classroom teachers, there were problems with internet access during this period. There are insufficient educational technology devices such as computers, tablet computers, etc. The competency of students and parents to use technology is quite insufficient. Students behaved arbitrarily on attendance to classes, and problems occurred in parental support, teacher-student communication, and teacher-parent communication. During the initial literacy teaching process, problems such as holding the pen incorrectly, not being able to organize the notebook, writing the letter incorrectly, not being able to understand and inability to combine sounds, and not being able to dictate were seen. Problems such as measurement and assessment problems, unable to feedback to students, and difficulty in following student progress were determined.

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Introduction

People are a country's most valuable resource. Schools are the institutions where these valuable resources are transformed into power. Schools are also very important institutions for their families and their environment, as they prepare students for professional and social life and shape their future. However, in the 2020-2021 academic year, schools in many countries around the world had to suspend face-to-face education. The World Health Organization (WHO) (WHO, 2020) officially declared the pandemic on 11 March 2020, after the coronavirus (COVID-19) spread to 114 countries and affected more than 118,000 people in 3 months.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Türkiye caused all institutions and organizations to take precautions, and the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey convened on 12.03.2020 and decided to continue education via distance education between 23-27 March 2020 due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic spreading rapidly in the world. Formal and non-formal education institutions of all levels and kinds affiliated with the Ministry of National Education were declared on vacation (MoNE, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has shocked education systems worldwide, and schools have had to adapt to the new system. All students and teachers were not affected equally. UNESCO (2021) states the pandemic has resulted in the loss of knowledge, skills, and topics for most students. Many students are alienated from schools, and some countries experienced increased levels of drop-out. Educational inequality has increased especially among disadvantaged students. Hanushek and Woessman (2020) predicted that learning losses of the pandemic would result in a 3% drop in lifetime income for students.

Decisions taken against the Covid-19 pandemic steered the education systems to search for alternatives. Reimers (2021) stated that digital alternative education practices during the pandemic should be considered largely improvised, and these are not outcomes of a careful planning and design. The efficacy of distance education strategies may not have the same effect among students with different socio-economic backgrounds. The accessibility to digital platforms affects students' participation and adaptation to the education system. These differences are reflected in academic achievement internationally and among students living in the same country. Limited economic resources negatively affect the opportunities and tendencies for teaching and learning of students and make access to resources used by students and teachers difficult.

Teachers, students, and education stakeholders have been required to use distance learning platforms to continue education due to the lockdown of schools following the WHO's declaration of an epidemic. The lockdown required teachers, parents, principals, and students to adapt to the new system in a limited period.

Even though the pandemic has had a negative impact on education, it has also had some positive effects. Most important effect is educators have innovated various improvements during lockdown to continue education. Literature related to improvements have provided information on the expectations and limitations of digital education strategies, innovations led by teachers, and the conditions that support the effective use of digital pedagogies. However, it must be admitted that the digital alternatives improvised during the pandemic were largely improvised - they were not the result of careful planning and design, and so far, researchers have been able to document and reseach a limited number of them. Concerning the efficacy of distance education strategies, there are significant differences between countries and students from different social backgrounds in how they are included in these strategies.

Distance education refers to technology-based education in which students are physically separated from their instructors for the entire duration of instruction (Ormrod, 2008). Distance education, also referred to as distance learning, e-learning and online learning, is a type of education that involves the physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication (Berg & Simonson, 2023). Distance education has traditionally focused on non-traditional learners such as full-time employees, military personnel and non-residents or individuals living in remote areas and unable to attend classroom classes. However, distance education has become an established part of the world.

There are advantages and disadvantages to taking distance learning courses. Some of the advantages include the ability to study at your own pace, flexibility of time and space, time savings (no commuting between home and school) and the fact that a distance learning course usually costs less. Disadvantages include a sense of isolation, difficulty staying motivated, lack of face-to-face interaction, difficulty getting immediate feedback, and the need for constant and reliable access to technology (De Paepe et al., 2018; Lei & Gupta, 2010; Venter, 2003; Zuhairi et al., 2006). In addition, converting a course content from face-to-face to online format is time-consuming and requires the teacher to be familiar with and willing to learn online learning pedagogy and teaching tools (Ryan et al., 2012). Some

students prefer to learn difficult concepts face-to-face (Jaggars, 2014) and believe that face-to-face instruction provides deeper learning than online (Holzweiss et al., 2014). It is difficult to design fair, equitable and rigorous assessment to minimize cheating and plagiarism online (Lee-Post & Hapke, 2017). Successful education requires the creation and maintenance of a reliable and robust infrastructure that supports both teachers and students (Moskal et al., 2013). Moreover, students may need additional motivation, organization, and self-discipline to succeed in their online learning efforts (Jacob & Radhai, 2016).

When the literature is examined, it is seen that there are a limited number of studies on the problems encountered in teaching primary literacy in distance education (Erbaş, 2021; Özcan & Saydam, 2021.; Kargın & Karataş, 2021; Gürbüz & Yılmaz 2021; Sağırlı, 2021; Aktaş & Çoban Sural, 2023). Sağırlı (2021) found that digital content, social media, internet resources, interested parents, and Educational Informatics Network (EIN) helped classroom teachers who taught primary literacy through distance education. On the other hand, he found that reasons such as insufficient internet, lack of technological tools, indifferent parents, socio-economic conditions, and lack of sufficient interaction with the student were the reasons that caused difficulties for classroom teachers in this process. Kargın and Karataş (2021) determined that internet infrastructure problems, excessive course hours, unconscious behaviors of parents, financial inadequacies of families, insufficient content of EIN and teachers' lack of in-service training negatively affected distance first literacy teaching. Özcan and Saydam (2021) stated that during the Covid 19 pandemic, students living in rural areas experienced more negativity than those living in cities. Şahin and Kalaycıoğlu Akis (2021) stated that during the Covid 19 pandemic distance education process, teachers made their students play games on sites such as Wordwall, EIN, Okulistik. Aktaş and Çoban Sural (2023) stated that the benefits of distance education environment to the process of teaching primary reading and writing were access to various opportunities through technology and educational portals and strengthening the communication between teachers and parents. The difficulties experienced in this process are more than the benefits, and they are expressed as students being negatively affected psychologically in the urgent distance education process, problems arising from technology and educational portals, difficulties in the reading and writing process, and negative effects on teacher-parent-student communication. With these studies, it is seen that the first literacy process with distance education involves more problems than benefits. It is noticeable that the problems are mostly technology-based and there are problems in teacher-parent-student communication. For this reason, this research

focuses on technology, interaction, technical aspects of the first literacy teaching process and evaluation of the teaching.

Determining the problems encountered in the process of teaching first literacy in distance education and the sources of these problems according to teachers' views in depth is an extremely important problem situation that needs to be researched.

Purpose of the Research

It can be predicted that first-grade students may have difficulties in their initial literacy learning as a result of factors not yet being able to read and write and limited ability to use digital platforms. This study aims to examine the problems encountered in the period of distance initial literacy teaching during the pandemic based on the first-grade primary school teachers' opinions. Alternative education practices, such as distance education, can be redesigned and developed by considering these problems and can be used more effectively to support the education process in non-pandemic.

Problem of the Research

This study seeks to answer following questions to determine the problems experienced in distance initial literacy teaching during the pandemic period:

What are the problems encountered in the initial literacy teaching by distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-Problems

1. What are the problems encountered in the initial literacy teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic due to technology (computer, internet, materials, etc.)?
2. What are the problems encountered due to interaction (class attendance, teacher-student-family communication, family support)?
3. What kind of problems did you experience int teaching reading (sound sense, letter recognition, reading speed, missing syllables, and words, etc.)?
4. What kind of problems did you experience in teaching writing (Pencil Grip, notebook arrangement, letter writing, etc.)?
5. What kind of problems did you experience with measurement and assessment?
6. What are the problems you experienced in initial literacy teaching?

Method

Model

This is a qualitative study that aims to determine the problems encountered in the initial literacy teaching during the COVID-19 period through distance education based on teachers' opinion. Qualitative research is a type of research in which researchers examine events in their natural settings and attempting to make sense of or interpret the phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Acording to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives

Reseach data were collected using semi-structured interview method. According to DiCicco and Crabtree (2006) semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most common interview format in qualitative research and can be either individual or group. Generally, it is done one time for an individual or a group and takes 30 minutes to several hours to complete. They are mostly around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee/s.

Study Group

One of the purposive sampling methods, criterion sampling method was used in this study. Acording to Patton, (2001) criterion sampling involves the selection, review, and examination of cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance

The study group consisted of classroom teachers who taught initial literacy teaching to first-grade students tought distance education during the pandemic period in the 2020-2021 academic year. Seven female and four male eleven primary classroom teachers of first grade in different provinces of Türkiye during the pandemic period voluntarily participated in the study group. Participants names were not requested for the protection of personal data and to improve the quality of the research data. Each participant was assigned a code (e.g., Teacher 1: T1, Teacher 2: T2).

Data Collection Tools

Data collection tool of the study is semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher called " Pandemic Period (COVID-19) Initial Literacy Teaching in Distance Education Opinion Form". The form was edited based on the opinions of two faculty members who were experts in the field of educational sciences during the development process of the data collection tool. While preparing the interview form, the relevant literature was first reviewed and a list of questions that could reveal the situation was prepared. The question list was finalized with the opinions of two different experts and two pilot interviews were conducted. As a result of the pilot interviews with volunteer participants, it was concluded that the research questions in the form were clear and understandable.

Collection of Data and Analysis

The " Pandemic Period (COVID-19) Initial Literacy Teaching in Distance Education Opinion Form" was shared online with classroom teachers who taught initial literacy teaching during the pandemic period. Classroom teachers from six different provinces of Türkiye participated voluntarily. The form was answered by the teachers online and e-mailed to the researcher. The researcher received the forms in October-November 2021.

The data were analyzed by content analysis using Maxqda software. Downe-Wambolt (1992, p. 314) defines the content analysis as a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena. The four main stages of content analysis are the decontextualisation, the recontextualisation, the categorization, and the compilation. In the first stage, the text was read, and each relevant segment of data attached to a code that relevant to the research question. This process is known as the "open coding process". The second step is the recontextualization of the data.

The coded area of the text was re-checked. The unmarked text and its relation to the purpose of the study were controlled. Data that were not relevant to the research were discarded. The third step is categorization. The codes were categorized. The last step is the compilation. At this stage, a summary of the themes, categories, and codes is represented in a table.

A field expert analyzed the data with the same process. The coding and the created themes and categories were reviewed with the field expert. After reaching a consensus, the findings were interpreted, and conclusions were presented.

Validity and reliability studies in qualitative research differ from quantitative research. The criteria for validity and reliability in qualitative research can be explained as being transparent at every stage of the research, explaining the procedures in detail and reporting the data in detail (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). In this study, care was taken to explain the procedures in detail throughout the process. At the point of ensuring internal reliability, cooperation was made between the coders and calculated by taking common opinions. The data collected during the research process were coded separately by the researchers as written texts, and the consensus between the researchers was calculated as 0.92 by taking into account the similar and different coding within the framework of consensus. At the point of ensuring external reliability, the characteristics of the participants should be defined, limitations should be explained and the process of collecting and analyzing the data should be mentioned (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). In this direction, these processes were explained separately under appropriate headings within the scope of the research and external reliability was tried to be ensured in this way.

Compliance with Ethical Standard

Ethics committee approval was received for this study from the ethics committee of Sakarya University (Date: September 20, 2023, Number: E-61923333-050.99-284514). The purpose of the study was explained to the participants. Informed consent forms were signed by all participants.

Findings

The six questions asked to the participants, the findings of the study are grouped under three themes.

Figure 1

Problems Encountered in Distance Initial Literacy Teaching during the Pandemic Period
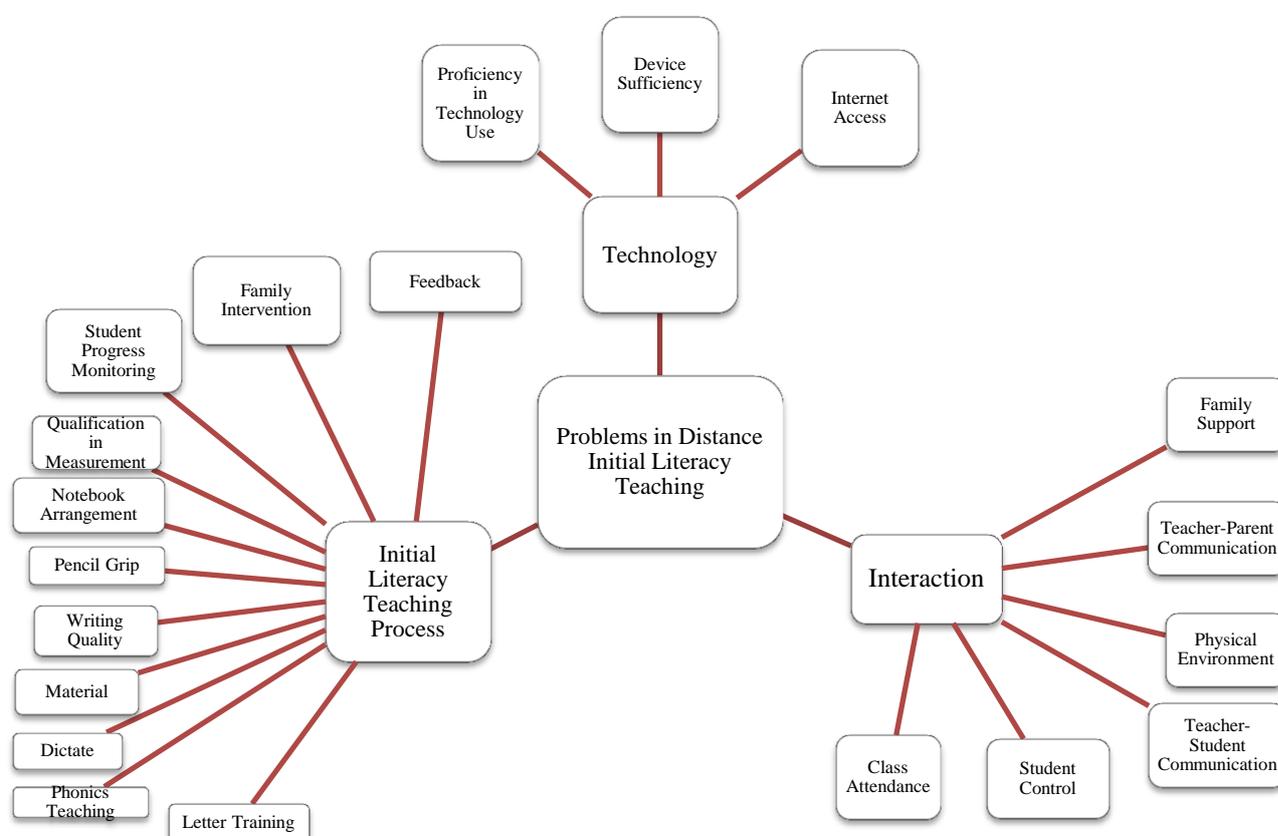
The answers given by the classroom teachers to the problems they experienced in the initial literacy teaching process with distance education during the pandemic period were analyzed. The findings were grouped under three themes: "Technology", "Interaction" and " Initial Literacy Teaching Process."

Classroom teachers stated that they experienced technology-based problems in initial literacy teaching to students in the distance education process.

Table 1

Classroom Teachers' Opinions on the Technology Theme

Codes of the Technology Theme	f
Internet Access	10
Device Sufficiency	9
Proficiency in Technology Use	5

Table 1 shows the opinions of classroom teachers on the problems relating to technology. The data were categorized into the codes of " Proficiency in Technology Use", " Device Sufficiency" and "Internet Access".

Classroom teachers reported that students and parents had problems with internet access and technology use. They stated that there are parents without the required devices for distance education. Sample statements of classroom teachers regarding these problems are below:

"Both the student and parents do not know how to use a computer.", "Connection problems were experienced on mobile phones" (T1).

"There were students not having a computer" (T4).

"Most of students did not have a internet access" (T2).

Classroom teachers stated that interaction problems were encountered in the process of initial literacy teaching in distance education.

Table 2

Classroom Teachers' Opinions on the Interaction Theme

Codes of the Interaction Theme	f
Class Attendance	14
Family Support	6
Teacher-Parent Communication	5
Physical Environment	2
Teacher-Student Communication	2
Student Control	2

Table 2 shows the opinions of classroom teachers on the problems relating to interaction. Students' non-attendance, poor family support, teacher-parent communication problems, inappropriate physical environment, communication problems, and difficult control over students from a distance were reported as problems. Sample statements of classroom teachers regarding these problems are below:

"*Students attend the lessons they like and do not attend the lessons they do not like*" (T1).

"*There was a disconnection as not all students attended the lesson*" (T5).

"*Communication has decreased with parents, which is a connection between teacher and the student*" (T11).

"*Although I recorded and uploaded letter training videos, I only had 2 parents watching and teaching at home*" (T6).

"*Most parents fully got involved and encouraged students during this period but some of them continued to a certain time, and some of them were not interested at all*" (T10).

Classroom teachers stated that they experienced problems in initial literacy teaching during distance education process.

Table 3

Classroom Teachers' Opinions on the Theme of Initial Literacy Teaching Process

Codes of the Initial Literacy Teaching Process	f
Feedback	4
Student Progress Monitoring	3
Material	3
Letter Training	2
Phonics Teaching	2
Dictate	2
Qualification in Measurement	2
Writing Quality	2
Pencil Grip	2
Notebook Arrangement	2
Family Intervention	1

Table 3 shows codes that classroom teachers' problems in initial literacy teaching. Unable to giving feedback, having difficulties in monitoring students progress, and lack of lesson materials are the most significant problems. They also stated that they had problems with letter training, phonics teaching, dictation and assessing students' academic achievement. They reported that some students gripping pencil incorrectly, problems in notebook arrangement, and sometimes parents made wrong interventions. Sample statements of classroom teachers regarding these problems are below:

"*Some negative behaviors turned into permanent as students could not get warnings immediately to correct their mistakes*" (T9).

"*It is hard to determine the level that students got*" (T3).

"*The materials for the lesson were insufficien.*" (T5).

"*Mistakes were made in the writing of the letters.*" (T3).

"*We had serious problems with pencil grip*" (T2).

"*Although I showed the letters and practiced them, I could not make them grasp the direction of the letters and the notebook arrangement*" (T1).

"*My students had difficulty in doing the activity of combining sounds*" (T8).

Discussion and Results

Six questions in the interview form were used to obtain the opinions of first-grade primary school teachers about the problems encountered in the initial literacy teaching through distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Answers are analyzed in the Maxqda program and grouped under three themes. Bu nedenle bulgular bu üç tema çervevesinde sunulmuştur. The results of the study are grouped under the themes of "Technology", "Interaction" and "Initial Literacy Teaching Process".

Teachers encountered "technology" based problems in initial literacy teaching during the pandemic period. First-grade students experienced internet access problems affects the lesson's flow and students' attention negatively. Students do not have a computer, tablet, etc. of their own to use. Both students and parents do not have enough proficiency in technology use. These problems may have been caused by the compulsory shift to distance education in a short period of time and giving parents and teachers a very limited preparation time. Erbaş (2021) and Gürbüz and Yılmaz (2021) stated that there are problems in internet connection and students do not have educational Technologies although EBA, Zoom and Youtube platforms are used in the process of teaching primary literacy as similar as finding of this study. Şahin and Kalaycıoğlu (2021) stated that the problems related to internet infrastructure and quality and device-related problems are the main system-based problems in the distance education process. Gürbüz and Yılmaz (2021) reported that most first-grade teachers had problems with internet access during the initial literacy teaching during the pandemic. Aktaş and Çoban Sural (2023) stated that common problems of first-grade teachers and parents in the initial literacy teaching with distance education were internet access, poor internet infrastructure, and technical problems (not having a device).

Interaction is another theme of research findings. Classroom teachers reported that most of the students did not attend class regularly. Weak and limited family support and

parents' poor communication with the teacher caused problems. Teacher-parent communication is essential for a successful learning process. Classroom teachers stated that they had problems communicating, and controlling students was difficult. Another problem is that most of the students' home conditions had a negative effect on the lesson process. Erbaş (2021) stated that some parents were uninterested and ignored the student's attendance to the lessons. Gürbüz and Yılmaz (2021) reported that most first-grade teachers had problems with family collaboration during the initial literacy teaching during the pandemic. Aktaş and Çoban Sural (2023) reported that teacher-parent-student communication was affected negatively in the distance education.

Classroom teachers stated that the initial literacy teaching was extremely difficult during the pandemic period. Teachers expressed that they had problems in monitoring students progress and giving feedback. These problems made it difficult to intervene with students gripping the pencil incorrectly, having problems with notebook arrangement, confusing the writing direction of the letter, and having difficulty recognizing the sound. The materials for learning were missing for many of the students making these problems worse. Erbaş (2021) also found that first-grade teachers who taught initial literacy teaching during the pandemic period had the most difficulty in the steps of combining sounds into syllables and combining syllables into words. Özcan and Saydam (2021) stated that students struggled with gripping the pen correctly, writing letters and the correct form of text in addition, dictating syllables, words, and sentences during the first literacy teaching process with distance education. Aktaş and Çoban Sural (2023) stated that students; could not achieve reading fluency and reading comprehension skills and phonics teaching was completed later in distance education compared to face-to-face education. The sound or internet access problems in computers caused problems about sound learning in letter teaching. It is difficult to teach pen-gripping, notebook arrangement, hearing and repeating sounds clearly, and writing as shown by the teacher through online platforms. It is affected by many factors, such as the strength and quality of the technological infrastructure, the qualities of the online platforms, and the proficiency of the teacher and the student in using technology. To overcome the problems in the distance education process, all education stakeholders of the education system must act in unity, be trained and supported technologically.

As a result, many problems were experienced in teaching reading and writing remotely during the epidemic period. It has been determined that classroom teachers experience technological problems (internet access, lack of devices required for distance education,

insufficient use of technology). Problems in terms of interaction (lack of teacher-parent, teacher-student communication, absenteeism, difficulty in student control, insufficient family support) were expressed. In the first reading and writing learning-teaching process, there was a lack of teaching materials, holding the pen incorrectly, problems with teaching letters and sounds, inability to take dictation, notebook disorganization, difficulty in following student development, inadequacy of students' physical environments, inability to give qualified feedback, problems in measuring academic success, misunderstandings of families. Intervention problems have been identified.

These problems experienced in distance primary literacy teaching have revealed the lack of technological infrastructure and technological literacy. The need to design distance education as a system that will make teacher-student-parent communication effective has been identified. The need to design primary literacy distance education materials in a way that facilitates both teaching and measurement and evaluation has emerged. It has also been observed that there is a need for parents to receive training on how to support their students.

Naturally, primary school students, teachers, and parents who experience the distance education process for the first time will encounter difficulties in this process. It is a fact that international problems such as the epidemic deeply affect education systems and system discussions in education also arise. Distance education has taken its place as an alternative or supportive educational practice at all levels of education.

Recommendations

Pandemics are the world's most serious problems. Education systems need to be revised against such problems that affect all of humanity educational administrators of education system should take precautions. Such research is crucial for reflecting the opinions of the classroom teachers involved in the process. Based on the results of the study, the following suggestions can be considered:

- Educational tools such as computers, tablet computers, etc. can be made accessible to everyone. Principals can provide the opportunity to acquire educational technologies for teachers and students.
- Internet access is necessary for the widespread use of educational technologies, sharing information, and have access to synchronous and asynchronous education.

Internet access can be considered a basic need, and all students, teachers, and principals can be provided internet for free and without any problems.

- Trainings on the use of technology can also be generalized for parents and students.

- Applications and digital platforms can be developed and integrated into the education system to simplify student-teacher parent-teacher communication in the distance education.

- Parents can be trained on what kind of support a primary school student may need and how to provide it.

- Interactive softwares and programs can be provided to ease initial literacy teaching through distance education.

- Online platforms can be developed that can be easily used by students and parents, where teachers can give feedback, measurement and evaluation can be done.

Compliance with Ethical Standard

Ethics committee approval was received for this study from the ethics committee of Sakarya University (Date: September 20, 2023, Number: E-61923333-050.99-284514).

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