

The Disadvantages of Distance Education Implementation, During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Greek Teachers' Opinions

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Abstract

In Greece, as in several countries all over the world, schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the 2019-2020 school year. The Greek Ministry of Education tried to operate online platforms so that students could have access to education. The teachers managed to respond to this challenge using mainly their own resources while most of them had not received any relevant training. A nationwide survey was designed investigating teachers' views on distance learning disadvantages. 515 teachers working in Greek primary education sector - both at kindergartens and primary schools- participated in the research. Their answers show five main disadvantages from the distance learning implementation at school education: (a) deficit in the interaction and communication among students and among the teacher and his/her students, (b) the teaching methods used were mainly teacher-centered despite the prescripts of the National Curriculum, (c) inequalities that arose for specific social groups of students, (d) schools' deficits in infrastructure and insubstantial teachers' in-service training regarding I.C.T. use, and (e) teachers' concern about the protection and the maintenance of students' personal data. Despite these disadvantages mentioned, teachers do not overlook the fact that the distance education implementation during the Covid-19 pandemic was principally an attempt to psychologically empower students learning.

Keywords: distance education, Covid-19 pandemic, Greece, teachers, primary schools, disadvantages

1. Introduction

Distance education includes different educational practices that hold no space or time limit. The educational material of distance education can be offered in a synchronous or asynchronous way through learning environments that are especially designed for distance education. These pedagogical environments also support the collaborative learning (Keegan, 1980).

Distance education is an educational method that is not based on a face-to-face teaching (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). Teachers should adjust their responsibilities, roles and pedagogical methods to distance education (Camacho, Joaquim, de Menezes, & Sant' Anna, 2020 · Rasmitadila et al., 2020). Distance education differentiates itself from face-to-face education, because the teacher is asked for different pedagogical practices and methods of evaluation to implement (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). Moreover, distance education has a more consultative role than face-to-face education (Anastasiades, 2020), while a teacher in distance education has to exploit alternative ways of approach and different skills (Baran & Correia, 2014). Apart from the technological means needed, distance education asks for a defined set of goals, teaching strategies and educational content as well as some coordination among the teachers (Andrade, 2020, as cited in Orhan & Beyhan, 2020). Students' needs in distance education do not resemble the needs students have in a face-to-face teaching process (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). According to Phan & Dang (2017), factors such as teachers' education, attitude, technical capacity, pedagogy, and methodology as well as time limits are some of the most important elements of distance education.

U.N.E.S.C.O. has adopted the point of view that each individual should have the opportunity to keep pace with knowledge in a learning society (Pitzalis, 2016, p. 12). Based on the «Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age», the European Commission supports the digital technologies' use for teaching and learning, since these technologies offer opportunities to many different groups of students. These technologies also lead to an increase in flexibility, customization and use of more interactive and attractive forms of collaboration and development of communication. For all this to happen, teachers had to offer high-quality and interesting learning experiences, while students should have some ICT knowledge so as to come to terms with these experiences. Educational systems and training systems should act in order specific dangers to be avoided. These dangers derive from the digital isolation or the inappropriate use of technology (C.O.M., 2020).

An investigation and an analysis of the educational systems' gradual transformation to digital systems of learning, has shown that this transformation is a "complex socio-technical case" (Perrotta & Selwyn, 2019, p. 15).

According to U.N.E.S.C.O., in August 2020, 673.114.704 students (38.4% of the total number of students) in 30 countries had to face schools' closure (U.N.E.S.C.O., 2020). In Greece, during the first phase of the covid-19 pandemic, schools closed like in many other countries. Then, educational activities were designed and implemented using platforms of asynchronous teaching. Starting in November 2020, synchronous teaching was also used (Anastasiades, 2020). Most of the teachers were unprepared for the transition from the on-site education to the distance education; teachers, school directors, supervisors for educational politics, even academics were unprepared for this transition (Sari & Nayir, 2020).

Many researchers point out that the distance education, as it was implemented during the covid-19 pandemic, did not have the same characteristics as the ordinary distance education usually has (Baran & Correia, 2014). Distance education during the covid-19 pandemic was an attempt for the schools to function somehow (Bawa, 2020), but mostly to help psychologically and emotionally their students (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond 2020). Therefore, these two teaching conditions cannot be identified as one and the same. Thus, many researchers point out that it is better to use the term «emergency distance teaching» (Jimoyiannis, Koukis & Tsiotakis, 2021).

2. Difficulties in the Distance Education Implementation

When implementing distance education cause of the covid-19 pandemic, many weaknesses have appeared, especially weaknesses regarding the technological limitations on the equipment and means available (Babinčáková & Bernard, 2020 · Giovanella, Passarelli & Persico, 2020 · Lapada, Miguel, Robledo & Alam, 2020 · Lindner, Clemons, Thoron & Lindner, 2020 · Rasmitadila et al., 2020 · Van Der Spoel, 2020). There were also social, financial, personal and family factors contributing to an unequal access to these means (Giovannella et al., 2020 · Moisi, 2020 · Rasmitadila et al., 2020). This inequality often leads to the digital school abandonment (Niemi & Kousa, 2020), especially for the socially and financially weak students (Orhan & Beyhan, 2020). However, the fact that a technological infrastructure exists in schools, it does not necessarily mean that all teachers take advantage of this infrastructure on a regular basis nor that it has an impact on their overall approach to teaching (Cuban, 2000).

Many different educational methods and practices should be combined for an effective distance education to be succeeded. Moreover, high-quality educational material should be created so as each student to be supported according to his/her needs (Bozkurt, 2019 · Niemi & Kousa, 2020). It is necessary for teachers to adjust from the face-to-face teaching to an online system of learning experiences that had never been implemented before. Teachers have to take advantage of various educational methods, different means and the teaching time available so as all the learning goals to be accomplished (Camacho et al., 2020 · Rasmitadila et al., 2020). Teachers with a greater experience or specialization in I.C.T. managed to adjust easier to the changes and easily organized the online courses they taught (Alea et al., 2020 · Babinčáková & Bernard, 2020 · Lassoued, Alhendawi & Bashitialshaaer, 2020). Students' and teachers' "readiness" (Gok, 2015), along with teachers' experience and competence to use the technological means were of vital importance. When the above elements lack, there are many negative impacts on students' learning and motivation (Hietanen & Scedholm-Hakinnen, 2022 · Ozaydin Ozkara & Cakir, 2018). Such difficulties make teachers unwilling to spend time on any knowledge concerning technical issues (Hietanen & Scedholm-Hakinnen, 2022). In general, it seems that teachers' opinions and expectations about distance education can affect distance education success (Orhan & Beyhan, 2020 · Van Der Spoel et al, 2020).

According to P.I.S.A.'s results, in 2018, teachers and students in most countries participating in the Assessment were not prepared to support distance education (Orhan & Beyhan, 2020). This finding seems to be related to the educational problems that came up during the covid-19 pandemic (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). It is stressed that an appropriate supportive system for both teachers and students is needed, despite the variety of the online tools existed (Martenev & Bernadowsk, 2016 · Van Der Spoel et al., 2020). It is also showcased the need for teachers' in-service training concerning distance education's methodology, educational material, and fundamental principles (Hayashi et al., 2020 · Katsini, 2021). Training can also refer to issues such as distance education's pedagogical dimension and its legal framework as a new teaching environment (Anastasiades, 2020).

During the general lockdown, in the first phase of the covid-19 pandemic (spring 2020), teachers mentioned that they faced another important difficulty; there was an interaction of low quality with their students and a lack of immediacy (Sari & Nayir, 2020). However, teacher-student interaction is an essential element of a successful learning experience (Hietanen & Scedholm-Hakinnen, 2022). Studies showed an increase in problems regarding students' stress management. Students felt stressed because of their social isolation along with the increased demands they faced due to their online courses (Lapada et al., 2020). However, students maintain their wellness only when there is a consideration for a balance between distance education and their free time (Niemi & Kousa 2020). Also, inequalities referring to students with special educational needs were heightened, because distance education can barely support the special and specific needs of these students (Moisi, 2020). At the same time, it was necessary for all to take into consideration

ethics and access to students' personal data (Lassoued, et al., 2020).

Other studies have shown that both school and parents play a crucial role in students' participation in distance education. This is because their support in technical and other issues was necessary so as the students to successfully complete their courses (Iivari, Sharma & Vent ä-Olkkonen, 2020 · Simons, Leverett, & Beaumont, 2019). During distance education, parents were asked to check on their children's progress, to support them in solving their exercises, and to facilitate them in the learning progress, in general. Sometimes, they had also to mediate in the communication among the students and their teachers (Lapada et al., 2020 · Rasmitadila et al., 2020 · Trust, Carpenter, Krutka, & Kimmons, 2020). Foti (2020) underlined the importance of parents' participation when distance education is implemented in the kindergarten. Popyk's research (2021) recorded and highlighted the even greater difficulties faced by immigrants' children in distance education. These students had to translate the educational material into their mother tongue, then to solve the exercises with their parents' help. After, they had to translate everything back to the mainstream school language.

Both students and teachers also reported difficulties in students' evaluation (Metin & Korkman, 2021) and failures to give immediate feedback and/or keep contact with the students (Lassoued, et al., 2020). However, it should be mentioned that, when using the appropriate means, online education can offer immediate and easy feedback. This characteristic is one of the most important benefits of distance education (Marteny & Bernadowsk, 2016). Students themselves consider receiving feedback very important, when it is timely and substantially done (Simons et. al., 2019).

Obviously, instructors did not only mention difficulties or problems in implementing distance education. On the contrary, many studies reported that the instructors found that the distance education significantly contributed to students' access to education (Burdina, Krapotkina & Nasyrova, 2019· Manesis, et al., 2022· Van Der Spoel et al., 2020) to an improvement in communication (Rasmitadila et al., 2020) and to students' digital literacy (Trust & Whalen, 2020). There is no consensus among students and teachers concerning the distance education, as it was implemented during the covid-19 pandemic. However, negative opinions mostly come from the teachers (Dolenc, Šorgo, & Ploj Vrtič, 2021).

The research question was formed after researchers reviewed the existing relevant literature (e.g Arnesen, et al, 2019 ·Bozkurt, 2019 ·Dereshiwsky et al, 2017 ·Foti, 2020 ·Giovannella, et al, 2020 ·Niemi & Kousa, (Burdina et al., 2019 · Giovannella, Passarelli & Persico, 2020 · Hietanen & Scedholm-Hakinnen, 2022 · Iivari, Sharma & Vent ä-Olkkonen, 2020 · Lapada et al., 2020 · Lassoued, et al., 2020 · Van Der Spoil et al, 2020), while they took into consideration their own experience in different positions within the Greek educational system. The research question investigated was: *“What are teachers' opinions concerning the disadvantages in implementing distance learning, during the Covid-19 pandemic?”*

2. Method

This research is a descriptive study with a qualitative approach to reveal, describe, and explain what teachers believe about the distance education implementation in Greek elementary schools. This is the suitable method for this study, since the participants can freely express their thoughts and opinions without any restrictions. On the other hand, this methodological framework allows the researchers to truly understand human action and behavior, since human behavior is determined by social processes and conditions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007 ·Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz, Morrow & Ponterotto 2017)

2.1 Participants' Characteristics

The participants of this study were primary school teachers who at the time of the research worked in elementary schools and kindergartens in the 13 Educational Regions of Greece. In Greece, primary school teachers teach either general subjects such as Language and Mathematics or teach specialty subjects such as Music, Gymnastics, Arts, I.C.T. and Foreign Languages (English and French or German). Study's participants were either General or Specialty teachers, although the majority of the participants were teachers of general subjects.

Regarding the participants' characteristics, 396 (76.9%) were female and 119 (23.1%) were male. Most of them (350 – 68.1%) served as teachers (in a primary school or in a Kindergarten), 61 (11.8%) as executives (headteachers, or coordinators of education) 50 (9.7%) as special teachers, while 54 (10.4%) of them served as specialty teachers. Most of them (289-56.1%) have a postgraduate diploma, while 280 (54.4%) have only the university degree. Regarding their education in I.C.T. use, 280 (54.4%) have a diploma, 195 (7.7%) have basic studies, while 40 of them (7.7%) don't have any education.

Concerning the geographical area, 49.5% (n=255) of the participants worked in the Region of Western Greece, 11.1% (n=57), of Eastern Macedonia & Thrace, 8.5% (n=44) of Peloponnese, 8.2% (n=42) of Attica, 7.4% (n=38) of Thessaly. Moreover, 4.9% (n=25) of the teachers participated were allocated in the Region of Central Macedonia, 3.5% (n=18) of Crete, 2.9% of Ionian Islands (n=15), 1.6% (n=8) of Epirus, 1.4% (n=7) of South Aegean, 0.4% (n=2) of North Aegean and the same percentage of teachers (0.4%) worked in Region of Central Greece and Western Macedonia. In other

words, the teachers' sample inquired was representative of the Greek teachers' population throughout the country.

2.2 Sampling Procedure

In the first place, a pilot study was carried out with the participation of 30 teachers working in elementary schools and kindergartens in February 2020. They also attended a postgraduate program at the time. Then, the researchers made all the necessary changes and improvements to the questionnaire given, taking into consideration the results of the pilot study.

Afterwards, the study took place in the time period from May to June 2020. It should be mentioned that each primary school or kindergarten is supervised by the Regional Directorate of Primary Education. Greece comprises of 13 such Regional Directorates. The study's questionnaire was sent by each area's Directorate to all the schools supervised. Due to the covid-19 pandemic, all teachers' professional email addresses were updated and in use. The study's questionnaire was forwarded to teachers' emails, and they decided whether to fill it or not.

2.3 Material and Methods

The questionnaire given was structured as follows; there were a total of nineteen (19) questions. The questions were split up in two (2) open-ended questions, two (2) closed-ended questions, where the participants had to choose among a number of given statements, and fifteen (15) multiple choice questions, where the teachers answered following a five-point Likert scale, 1=strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree. The present research focused on the teachers' responses to the one of the open-ended questions of the questionnaire concerning which were the main difficulties that teachers faced during the implementation of distance education in Greece during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study is considered to be valid, since the data collected had an adequate depth and breadth. It should be underlined that all the participants took part in this study on their own free will. Also, they were subjective but had no interest whatsoever that could possibly put an obstacle to the study's goals (Winter 2000, as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 133). The research was reliable, since its validity was assured, the design of the methodology was clearly structured and described and the data collection process was completely and accurately described.

It should be mentioned that the data analysis was based on a firm and clear method, while the researchers had a solid knowledge of the education field since they work on it. So, two of the researchers had the task to look over the data collected and whether the data were properly used (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993 ·Lincoln, 2001). This study followed all the ethics rules such as the anonymity of the participants. Prior to their participation, all the subjects were informed about the study's goals and content as well as their right to withdraw their participation at any point of the study (Fontana & Frey, 1998).

2.4 Analyzing of Data

A thematic content analysis was conducted on the data collected, according to Braun & Clarke (2006). Their method consists of a six faces procedure (familiarization with the data, coding the data, theme development, refinement of the themes, naming themes and writing the report). Teachers' answers were categorized into five themes: (a) the insubstantial interaction and communication between them and students, (b) the use of teacher-centered teaching methods, (c) the inequalities caused by distance education for specific social groups of students, (d) schools' deficits in infrastructure and insubstantial teachers' in-service training regarding I.C.T. use, and (e) the protection and the maintenance of students' personal data.

3. Results

In the unity teachers' responses about the difficulties they faced during the implementation of distance education in Greece, are presented. As it was stated before, 5 different categories of answers stood out.

3.1 Insubstantial Interaction and Communication

A large group of teachers' responses (340) showcases a deficit in the implementation of distance education. This deficit is the insubstantial interaction and communication among students and among the teacher and his/her students. It also has a direct impact on the students' educational process and learning; in this way, the complementary character of distance education is underlined.

"The communication among the teacher and his/her students is lost. There is no interaction, and the students easily stop learning and quit their courses, finding excuses. The contact among students is also lost"

"There is no meaningful contact with the instructor. There is no classroom interaction; the contact and the communication as well as working in teams"

"Distance education has only negative elements to offer, from the moment that you are not at school, and you do not see your students. You cannot see and comprehend what they do, how they feel"

"There is a lack of personal contact as well as a failure in cultivating a healthy interpersonal relation between the teacher(s) and the students."

“Students interact mostly with their teaching material and much less among themselves. Thus, the immediacy of the communication is lost”

“Teacher-student interaction in distance education is not the same as it is in face-to-face education, especially for the younger grades. It is more tiring, impersonal and cold”

“There is no case that it can replace the natural relation of teacher- student, the classroom’s atmosphere and the unconstrained emotions and the human contact”

“There is no case that the distance education can replace the dynamics developed among the students and among the teacher and his/her students within a classroom”

“There is no case it can exist without the face-to-face teaching”

“It was a last resort solution. It cannot have the same results with the face-to-face teaching”

“Distance education has some negative aspects because this education is based on the interaction, the emotion and the personal choices. Things cannot be seen as behind a screen”

“Regarding the screen of the synchronous education, we saw “frozen” faces that have lost their brightness, since they cannot speak and make jokes with their classmates. They cannot touch each other and communicate at ease”

3.2 Teacher-centered Teaching

Another group of teachers’ responses (100) focuses on the way teaching is realized in distance education. Teaching is mostly teacher-centered, and students participate less in the educational process and in the team collaboration. Also, students cannot effectively and experientially teach. As a result, students and especially, those of younger age are tired and ignore the whole process. Moreover, they consider necessary the production of teaching material designed especially for distance education.

“A basic element of distance education is students’ self-regulation. However, children maybe cannot succeed such goals, because of the developmental stage they are at and due to the lack of any relevant training concerning this process.”

“The immediate modification of our teaching is missing. This change is based on the various signals a teacher receives from his/her students (body language, look). There is no teacher’s engagement with pedagogical issues and the focus on teaching issues prevails”

“The trainee studies on his/her own. He/She is not able to immediately pose a question to his/her trainer”

“Many times, feedback is not immediately given”

“Distance education is lonelier, more private and gloomier. The school break offers a vital space and some time for the students to communicate, a fermentation process. Knowledge taught within school classrooms can be experientially exercised during breaks and in an effortless way”

“The collaboration among the students stops”

“The students do not know their own progress compared to their classmates’ progress. Thus, sportsmanship is not developed, as it is usually developed within a team”

“Students do not show the same interest as they did in the classroom”

“Distance education becomes tiring and boring, because of someone being still in front of a computer screen”

“The students easily interrupt their learning by quitting the course and making up excuses...”

“Children with lack of attention are more easily distracted”

“The lack of any preparation and knowledge caused stress and negative feelings in many students”

“Not all courses are easy in being taught in distance education”

“These difficulties are noticeable by students of younger ages, when the educational process is experientially implemented”

“Distance education demands another way of approach with worksheets and evaluation”

“It expects lots of time for preparation and organization”

3.3 Causing Social Inequalities

Some teachers’ answers (90) expressed the opinion that the implementation of distance education led to creating a new form of inequalities, especially among some socially vulnerable groups of students.

“Not all the tools of the distance education fit to different students’ needs”

“For the majority of the students with special needs, the face-to-face education is a necessity”

“Distance education stressed both the social and the financial inequalities among the students even more”

“It eliminates some students from the educational process, especially the students from lower socio-financial strata”

“Distance education magnifies the socio-financial inequalities among the students”

“It excludes the weak students in a learning, developmental and mostly financial level”

“Distance education is equal for all students on the condition that all have computers and a fast internet connection. However, this does not exist in Greece”

“Not all students are able to afford a device with internet connection and/or an internet connection”

“The ones that do not hold the necessary infrastructure (i.e., internet connection), they are immediately excluded from the learning process”

“Distance education functions unequally for the students without equipment”

“Many students and teachers do not have the appropriate technological equipment”

“The knowledge of I.C.T./technological tools’ use is necessary”

“Distance education demands parents’ help to students to complete their homework. Thus, some parents are many times unwilling to help, or they lack the necessary knowledge and technological equipment, so they cannot participate in distance education and help their children”

“Especially in the first grades of the elementary school, there is not any support by the family (i.e., parents who speak another language/immigrants)”

“Distance education expects the parents to help their preschool children and to guide them, while having some knowledge about I.C.T. skills”

3.4 Teachers’ In-Service Training

The participating teachers (40 responses) insisted on schools’ shortages in technological equipment. These shortages make distance education even more difficult to implement for both students and teachers. Another issue that comes up in teachers’ responses is their own limited knowledge in I.C.T.

“The technological equipment is not as near as it is needed for the implementation of distance education”

“There are technical problems (i.e., internet connection, computers of an older generation, platforms, servers, etc.). Most of the time, teachers had to solve these problems themselves”

“The deficient teachers in qualifications, the inadequate pedagogical methods used along with a high financial cost compared to the quality of education offered”

“A successful distance education requires both an expertise and a good use of the technological equipment”

“Many teachers do not have basic knowledge about ICT and online applications”

“The lack of teachers’ in-service training concerning the distance education implementation”

“Some teachers of an older age are asked to learn a new way of teaching, something that they are not always capable of”

3.5 Protection of Personal Data

A few teachers (9 responses) puzzled over the maintenance and the protection of students’ personal data, especially for the younger students. They talked about security issues.

“For older people, there are issues of personal data security. Let’s not forget the cases of school bullying. These cases can be increased when embarrassing moments of young students and adolescents are documented during digital classes”

“There is always the danger of infringing on someone’s personal data”

“School classroom’s privacy is cancelled”

“Infringement of personal data”

“a young student has not developed yet his/her critical thinking so as to discern right information from wrong information. He/she has a huge volume of information to handle, since there is lots of information on the internet”

“Children familiarize themselves with technologies. However, this situation entails many dangers such as

addiction to them or misusing them”

“Lastly, a young student cannot protect him/herself from the online dangers”

4. Discussion

As it was mentioned above, teachers' opinions were categorized into five main themes. With regard to the inadequate interaction and communication with their students, teachers argued that the distance hinders the learning process; it cannot be interactive, there is no personal contact with the students and there are difficulties in developing a pedagogical relationship. The learning process does not only involve the cognitive area, but also the interaction, the inclusion, and the team participation among the students. Unfortunately, distance education limits the collaboration and the immediacy among the students who cannot interact and express their feelings in the same way when both teachers and students interact on impulse within an ordinary school classroom. Communication becomes even more deprived because of the lack of information that nonverbal messages offer (Hietanen & Scedholm-Hakinnen, 2022 · Sari & Nayir, 2020 · Van Der Spoel et al., 2020).

Educators concluded that the distance education offered a medium of communicating with their students (Anastasiades, 2020 · Manesis et al., 2022). However, it cannot replace the team's dynamics within a school classroom, since it is a lonely method of learning (Ozaydin, Ozkara & Cakir, 2018). They also expressed their fears that distance education leads to students' social alienation (Lapada et al., 2020) and lack of motivation (Hietanen & Scedholm-Hakinnen, 2022 · Ozaydin Ozkara & Cakir, 2018). In any case, distance education cannot replace face-to-face education. It can only function as a supplementary method of teaching, because the ordinary face-to-face school classroom is irreplaceable (Katsini, 2021).

Regarding the teaching methods used during distance education, teachers believe that teacher-centered methods were mainly used. They also think that the lack of experiential learning, participation and collaboration among the students transforms the educational process. It is not a learning process anymore, but a process of mere information. Moreover, giving feedback to students is not always easy or timely, while students' lack of motivation or lack of interest is always a possibility (Hietanen & Scedholm-Hakinnen, 2022 · Ozaydin Ozkara & Cakir, 2018). Distance education can increase students' psychological stress (Lapada et al., 2020), while it expects from the students to self-regulate; something that is not plausible by all students. Teachers also refer to the difficulties in students' evaluation (Aslan, 2006 · Duyar, 2016, as cited in Metin & Korkman, 2021). Teachers had to use distance education activities as an assessment method, even though these assignments and activities are mostly means of learning and not methods of evaluation within distance education's pedagogical environment (Anastasiades, 2020). Teachers also underlined the difficulties faced by students with attention deficits (Moisi, 2020). The younger students also dealt with problems such as they cannot easily adjust to the computer, use it, and focus on an activity or subject. In general, they cannot handle information by themselves. These students also require a greater effort by the teacher in order to attract and maintain their attention and interest. Since an engagement to pedagogical issues is missing, students end up to simply keep in touch with the school reality (Manesis et al., 2022). In some cases, the students even abandon the course giving different excuses (Niemi & Kousa, 2020). Teachers mentioned the risk for students to stay in front of a screen for many hours. This situation can cause students' tiredness or even a possible dependency or addiction. To summarize, distance education is a totally different way of teaching than teaching in an actual school classroom. Distance education requires time and effort from the educators so as to create the adequate teaching material (Bozkurt, 2019 · Niemi & Kousa, 2020). At the same time, it is not easy to teach subjects of a more practical character (Lassoued, et al., 2020), such as Physical Education or Visual Arts (Baran & Correia, 2014 · Niemi & Kousa, 2020).

What is more, teachers believe that the distance education implementation can lead to causing new inequalities among the students. Some students have no access to the necessary technological equipment (a computer, a fast internet connection, relevant equipment, a working space at home). These students cannot attend distance education, or they cannot attend it in equal terms (Babinčáková & Bernard, 2020 · Giovannella, Passarelli & Persico, 2020 · Lapada et al., 2020 · Lindner et al., 2020 · Rasmitadila et al., 2020 · Van Der Spoel, 2020). Distance education is an even more difficult condition for the children with special needs (Moisi, 2020), the children from vulnerable social groups (Giovannella et al., 2020 · Moisi, 2020 · Orhan & Beyhan, 2020 · Popyk, 2021 · Rasmitadila et al., 2020) or for the children whose parents cannot be with them or help them at all. These parents do not have any knowledge about I.C.T.; something necessary when the students attending distance education are very young. In such cases, parents' presence in online classes was not only useful, but obligatory, because the teachers could not fulfill children's needs by distance (Foti, 2020 · Iivari et al., 2020 · Lapada et al., 2020 · Rasmitadila et al., 2020 · Simons et al., 2019 · Trust et al., 2020).

Teachers' responses also revealed their insubstantial in-service training about I.C.T. use (Anastasiades, 2020 · Hayashi et al., 2020 · Katsini, 2021).

Lastly, the protection's importance concerning students' personal data is highlighted (Lassoued, et al., 2020 · Niemi & Kousa 2020). This issue was also reported by the Hellenic Data Protection Authority that called on the Ministry of Education to take into account the Authority's recommendations as explained in its Opinion. Authority also asked the

Ministry to alter the relevant impact assessment and fill in the necessary changes concerning personal data protection within an exclusive period of three (3) months (Hellenic Data Protection Authority, 2021).

5. Conclusions

The present study is one of the first ones attested in Greece with regard to the distance education implementation following the covid-19 pandemic outburst and the suspension of the school units' operation. The study uses the qualitative methodology and highlights the difficulties and problems faced during the distance education implementation. The disadvantages of this educational circumstance are underlined without simply blaming the ones taking the decisions or invoking the weaknesses and/or shortages in schools' infrastructure.

The teachers participating in the study do not overlook the fact that the distance education implementation during the Covid-19 pandemic was mostly an attempt to psychologically empower students rather than effectively teaching them (Hodges et al., 2020). After all, the teachers made extraordinary efforts to implement distance education without having adequate knowledge, experience or even teaching material and online resources (Camacho et al., 2020 ·Niemi & Kousa, 2020).

There were 515 teachers of all expertise, working in primary education who were randomly selected from all over the Greece and participated in the research. They answered to a questionnaire that consisted of 19 questions. One of these questions, it was an open-ended one concerning the disadvantages of the distance education implementation. A thematic analysis of the responses was used, and five (5) main disadvantages emerged.

According to teachers' answers, one significant problem was that communicating with students did not lead to the development of a pedagogical relationship. Since there was no interaction or use of the non-verbal messages in distance education, students could not express their feelings, or they faced some significant limitations to it. Despite its shortcomings and limitations, the distance education implementation during the covid-19 pandemic functioned as a facilitating factor in the learning process. Otherwise, students would have no access in education at all (Burdina, et al., 2019 ·Manesis, et al. 2022 ·Van Der Spoel et al., 2020)

Moreover, the teaching style used was mostly teacher-centered instead of implementing the experiential learning, even though the pedagogy and the structural didactics suggest otherwise. Another difficulty mentioned by the teachers was the students' assessment during the distance education implementation. Teachers also underlined the need for an educational material specifically designed for distance education (Niemi & Kousa, 2020).

Another finding of the research refers to teachers' opinion that the distance education implementation and its form led to creating inequalities among the students. Students from vulnerable social groups dealt with the lack of the necessary equipment, while the children with special needs and younger students in the kindergarten and in the first grades of the elementary school had to attend distance education with their parents' help (Lapada et al, 2020).

What is more, the importance of teachers' in-service training was showcased. It helps teachers to implement new and different teaching methods, use the appropriate educational material, organize and present it in a better way (Trust & Whalen, 2020). Also, it enhances a wider students' participation in the educational process (Niemi & Kousa, 2020 ·Siemens & Tittenberger, 2009 ·Van Der Spoel et al., 2020).

Lastly, teachers indicated issues concerning personal data security. These issues were also marked by the Hellenic Data Protection Authority that gave specific instructions to the Greek Ministry of Education.

This educational circumstance showed that teachers and parents can successfully cooperate for their children's education. It is a challenge, but also a guide to use in the future so as to aim at an open, democratic and inclusive school. Using collaborative learning sets out to form the future democratic citizens. After the distance education implementation due to the covid-19 pandemic, schools as well as the educational policy makers are more experienced and prepared to deal with any similar difficult situation if needed.

Future studies could extensively study teachers' opinions on distance education disadvantages by using interviews and/or observation in situ. They could also compare teachers' opinions, students' opinions and parents' opinions on this topic. One of the limitations of this study is that the study took place shortly after the distance education implementation. This fact may have affected teachers' opinions concerning both the distance education benefits and disadvantages that they were able to recognize themselves. Another point to be mentioned concerns the type of distance education implemented; teachers' responses cannot be clearly connected whether the distance education was performed in a synchronous, asynchronous or blended learning way.

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Notes

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