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What are the Regional Challenges for Inclusive Distance Education During COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkey? A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Inclusive education has come to the agenda again due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, research on rural-urban inequality in inclusive education during COVID-19 pandemic is limited. This study aims to reveal the regional challenges for inclusive distance education during COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. We adopted qualitative research design and a case study model. We chose two different study group among undergraduate students both living in disadvantaged rural areas and living in socio-economically advantageous cities. The participants were 38 undergraduate students. This qualitative study was performed in 2021-2022 academic year. The results revealed that there were notable differences between the two groups' views on the inclusiveness and effectiveness of distance education. The first group reported the challenges stemmed from disadvantaged economic conditions. The second group reported the problems such as lack of motivation, stress, mental fatigue, and trouble focusing. Distance education is seen non-inclusive and ineffective by the first group. The second group evaluates distance education as inclusive and sufficient. The participants also made suggestions to increase inclusiveness of distance education.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last months of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in Wuhan has globally been effective. The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected education, economy, social life, and especially the health of people. In an attempt to halt the virulent spread of COVID-19, governments throughout the world responded with different measures. As the virus spread, the drastic measure of 'lockdown' was introduced across the globe (Barkas, Armstrong, & Bishop, 2020). In many countries education was suspended to control the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. In many countries, the students had to continue education through distance education, which was all different from the face-to-face education system.

The UNICEF Report (2020a) indicates that as the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic last longer than thought, the risk of dropping out of school increases especially for the children under the risk and the students living in disadvantaged rural areas. This report also emphasizes the necessary measures should be taken to prevent the interruption of education. During COVID-19 pandemic, distance education tools have a crucial role to create a safe learning environment for students at all grades (UNESCO, 2020a).

One of the main reasons why students cannot access distance education in Turkey is that families do not have home internet connections. OECD (2020) data showed that less than half of the households in Turkey could access internet. Moreover, these challenges deepened inequalities in access to distance education (Yildiz & Akar-Vural, 2020). This research focuses on the regional challenges of inclusive distance education during COVID-19 pandemic by referring to the perspectives of two separate group of undergraduate students. The literature review below deals with the following three topics: the concept of inclusive education, the theoretical background of obstacles for inclusive distance education and then presents the literature about inclusive distance education during COVID-19 pandemic in the context of Turkey.

THE CONCEPT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

One of the greatest challenges faced individuals in most societies throughout the world is the exclusion policies and practices, which prevented participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life (UNESCO, 2004). Inclusive education is perceived as an approach to contest these exclusionary policies and practices (Themane & Thobejane, 2018). Inclusive education as a global movement, emerged in the past 35 years as a response to the exclusion of the learners who were viewed as different by education systems (Engelbrecht et al., 2016). In this sense, inclusive education initiative became a current issue at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 (UNESCO, 2003). Over the past three decades, the idea of inclusive education has become well established in the academic and policy domains (Walton, 2017). Inclusive education not only emphasizes the equal rights of students with and without special educational needs, but also ensures that all students receive social learning opportunities and valuable academic resources (UNESCO, 1994). This humanistic educational philosophy has been widely accepted by most countries that support and welcome diversity among all students (Gaitas & Martins, 2017). Moreover, Carrington et al. (2012) clarify inclusive education as an educational process, which underpinned by values of social justice and citizenship that promote equity, participation, respect for diversity, compassion, care, and entitlement. According to Articles and Dyson (2005), it has emerged from the idea that education is a basic human right for all children.

THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Equal access to education, particularly in the context of socio-economic differences, is still one of the grand challenges of 21st century (Madar & Danoch, 2021). It is a well-known fact that especially migrant and refugee children, children in conflict with the law, out-of-school children and youth and boys and girls living in difficult circumstances or abusive homes were already facing significant barriers

to participation in education. The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply exacerbated existing education and social inequities. So, the students from low-income families, students living in rural areas with poor infrastructure, students from ethnic and linguistic minorities, and the students with disabilities, experience lower education and social outcomes than their peers (UNICEF, 2020b).

Inclusive pedagogy is a teaching and learning approach that supports teachers in responding to individual differences among students without marginalizing any students (Florian, 2014). The inclusive pedagogical approach is to be also valid in the distance learning environment. In this sense, inclusive distance education have some criteria. One of these criteria is student's participation. Student participation is achieved by setting clear goals and using a variety of tools (Hitchcock et al., 2002). Another criterion is the competence of teachers in distance education techniques. In the distance education process, teachers must be sufficient in distance education methods and techniques to meet the needs of all students in terms of inclusiveness of education (Frumos, 2020). Another important criterion for the inclusiveness of distance education is that all students have the necessary technological devices and sufficient internet connection. However, students' access to technological devices and internet connectivity may not be sufficient, and teachers may face additional challenges in finding the best strategies for curriculum design online (Coy et al., 2014). Moreover, another criterion is equal access to education. Particularly in the context of socio-economic differences, is still one of the twenty-first century's grand challenges. Living below the international poverty line means not only being denied access to basic goods, but also being denied basic rights such as the right to education, the right to equal treatment in public institutions and the right to participate in political life (Beitz & Goodin, 2009; Broderick, 2018). In addition, Limited access to distance education in geographically disadvantaged regions significantly reduces the probability of students from low socio-economic backgrounds to succeed in higher education. To cope with these challenges Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) presented two possible approaches. First, the additional needs approach (that focuses only on the student who has special education needs and the demand of additional support). Second, the inclusive pedagogical approach (that focuses on all the students of the classroom). UNESCO research (2020b) shows that in 42% of low- and low-middle-income countries, the necessary infrastructure for distance education is not used effectively. On the other hand, insufficient internet capacity is another problem for inclusive distance education especially in underdeveloped countries (Roskvist et al., 2020). In addition, students may experience interest and motivation problems in this process. In literature, there are different suggestions for the solution of these problems. Reimers and Schleicher (2020) assert that education administrators should develop plans to continue inclusive education including alternative methods in current social isolation period. In addition, UNESCO (2020c) recommends that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the countries should make good preparations in four areas: technology, content, pedagogy, and monitoring-evaluation. Moreover, UNICEF (2020b) research emphasizes that the social and emotional support should be ensured to the students during COVID-19 pandemic.

Rural communities located far from cities or government centres are disadvantaged due to the remoteness of access to educational resources and lack of internet infrastructure in inclusive distance education practices, economic shortcomings or, simply, lack of the qualified distance education technology (Begum et al. 2018). Research, conducted by UNICEF (2020b) titled 'Building Resilient Education Systems beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic', seeks to help maintain and promote quality, inclusive education and learning for all children and young people throughout and beyond the outbreak and recovery phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, inclusive education was discussed within the scope of access to distance education and examined in the context of university students' access to distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study are expected to encourage the education community to address the major inequalities in access to quality, inclusive education provision and the significant learning disparities across groups of children during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

IN TURKEY CONTEXT

In Turkey, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face education was suspended by Council of Higher Education (CoHE) as of March 12, 2020 (CoHE, 2020a). Then, CoHE decided to conduct higher education through distance education in the 2019-2020 Spring semester. Data of CoHE (2020b) show that 79% of the public universities continued on-line education during the pandemic. In addition, 97% of them provided 'technical support' to their academic staff in distance education. Contrary to these official data, in a report, prepared by Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey [TEGV] (2020), the results showed that the most of students required computer or tablet to access distance education during COVID-19 pandemic. Telli and Altun (2020), found that the students who do not have access to the internet, or cannot access the internet outside of their schools, and the students who do not have a tablet or computer to follow the courses have problems. However, technical support is inadequate at almost all educational level (Saritas & Barutcu, 2020). In this sense, Eren (2020), asserts that as education systems are negatively affected by the pandemic, an effective inclusive education policy is necessary as a requirement of the social state principle. Moreover, Bertiz and Kocaman-Karoglu (2020), found that time spent in distance learning environment and the frequency of participation to synchronized courses were the main stressors, which affected students' motivation in distance education process.

In a metaphor study, Kaban (2021) determined that the teachers, students, and parents had a negative perception related to distance education in COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Karadag and Yucel (2020), examined the satisfaction levels of undergraduate students regarding distance education practices of universities during the COVID-19 process. Sampling group states that they are not satisfied with the management of their faculties and especially with the content of digital teaching materials in distance education practices during the COVID-19 process. In addition, the results revealed that only 63% of sampling group has an internet connection in their home. The ⅓ of sampling group does not have a computer or tablet. The ¼ of sampling group stated that they could not participate in distance education activities because they did not have internet connection or sufficient tools. These results reveal that there are challenges in inclusive distance education including higher education, during the pandemic process in Turkey. According to Erkut (2020), instead of creating temporary solutions the CoHE and all universities should allocate resources to effective online education during the pandemic.

In literature, the examination results show that previous studies have focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on distance education (e.g., Cakın & Kulekci-Akyavuz, 2020; Genc & Gumrukcuoglu, 2020; Karadag & Yucel, 2020). Some of these studies focus on the effectiveness of distance education (e.g., Atasoy et al., 2020; Basaran et al., 2020; Durak et al., 2020). The studies on the challenges for inclusive distance education during COVID-19 pandemic are quite limited. In this research, it was aimed to reveal the challenges for inclusive distance education in depth referring to the views of undergraduate students during COVID-19 pandemic. It was also aimed to offer comprehensive suggestions based on the perspectives of undergraduate students for the future inclusive applications during the COVID-19 outbreak in higher education. The results of this study are of great importance to comprehend deeply the challenges for inclusive distance education during COVID-19 pandemic. Although face-to-face education continues in many countries, there are serious uncertainties about when the COVID-19 pandemic will fully end. On the other hand, experts are making serious warnings that the COVID-19 pandemic will increase its impact again with the Autumn season of 2022. In the event of a new peak, the resumption of distance education does not seem very likely. In this sense, it is anticipated that the results of this research will contribute significantly to the provision of inclusive distance education both in higher education and in the K-12 basic education. In addition, it is expected that the distance education experience gained during the pandemic process will mediate to create a reference frame in terms of distance education in the world where education has become relatively digital. For this purpose, the problem sentence of the research was expressed as "*What are the regional challenges for inclusive distance education during COVID-19 pandemic?"*

METHOD

RESEARCH MODEL

In this research, a case study model was adopted, because case study is an empirical research method that investigates a current phenomenon in its own real-life framework and examines different social events in a versatile, systematic, and in-depth manner (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). Since case study is used to provide a holistic and in-depth understanding of current and real-life events (e.g., crisis, social events, international relations, individual life cycles, etc.) (Yin, 2009; Zainal, 2007), this model was used to reveal the views of undergraduate students related to the inclusiveness of distance education. Moreover, since case study is used for a deep and holistic understanding of a particular phenomenon when the boundaries of the context or situations are not known precisely (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), it was used to depict a deep and holistic views of undergraduate students on inclusiveness of distance education. Depending on these approaches, inclusive distance education was accepted as a social case and focused on the factors that challenging this social case during the COVID-19 pandemic.

PARTICIPANTS

Data were collected from two separate participant groups. A criterion sampling technique was adopted in selecting participants to guarantee to identify a study group that had sufficient experience and knowledge of the researching topic (Glesne, 2016; Neuman & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2015). The first criterion was to be living in a disadvantaged region. The second criterion was to be living in a rural area. The third criterion was to be living in a province with low socio-economic status. So, the first group was selected among the students who living in rural areas of provinces with low socio-economic status (participant who living in rural areas of provinces with low socio-economic status was abbreviated as 'RS'). The first criterion to be including in second group was to be living in an advantaged region. The second criterion was to be living in an urban settlement. The third criterion was to be living in a province with high socio-economic status. The second group was chosen among the undergraduate students who living in provinces with high socio-economic status (participant who living in urban settlements with high socio-economic status was abbreviated as 'US'). The ranking level were defined as the cities located in the lowest and highest ranking, respectively, according to the Socio-Economic Development Ranking Survey of Provinces and Regions (Acar et al., 2019). The number of participants was 38. The number of participants who living in rural areas of provinces with low socio-economic status (6th level: see Table 1) was 18. The number of participants who living in provinces with high socio-economic status (1st level: see Table 1) was 20. The background information of participants in this research is summarised in Table 1.

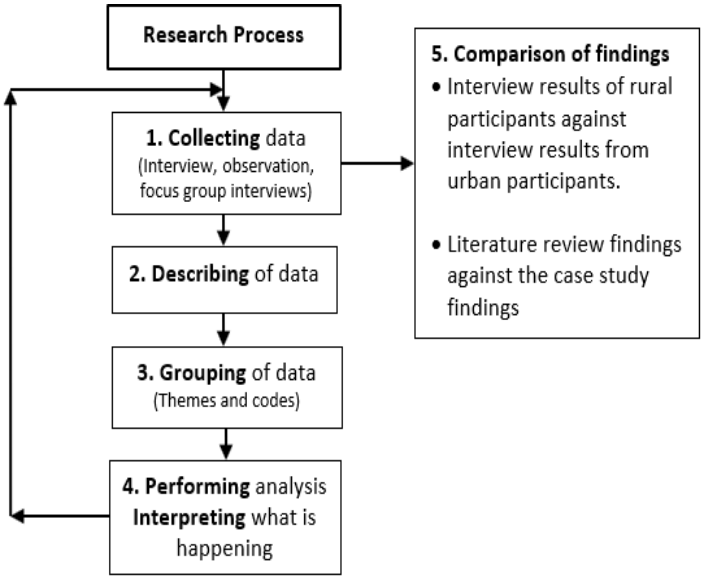
Table 1. *The Background Information of Participants*

1st level	*Female*	*Male*	*Grade*	*Age*	*6th level*	*Female*	*Male*	*Grade*	*Age*
Ankara	2	1	Freshmen (1)	19	Iğdır	2	2	Freshmen (2)	19, 20
			2nd Grade (2)	21, 23				2nd Grade (2)	21, 22
İzmir	2	2	3rd Grade (2)	21, 24	Bingöl	1	2	3rd Grade (2)	22, 23
			4th Grade (2)	23, 27				4th Grade (1)	26
Kocaeli	1	3	Freshmen (1)	23	Şanlıurfa	1	2	Freshmen (1)	21
			2nd Grade (2)	21, 24				2nd Grade (1)	23
			3rd Grade (1)	23				3rd Grade (1)	22
Bursa	2	3	Freshmen (2)	22, 23	Mardin	2	3	Freshmen (2)	19, 21
			2nd Grade (2)	21, 24				3rd Grade (1)	23
			4th Grade (1)	25				4th Grade (2)	24, 26
Eskişehir	1	2	Freshmen (1)	21	Ağrı	2	1	Freshmen (1)	19
			2nd Grade (1)	23				3rd Grade (1)	25
			3rd Grade (1)	24				4th Grade (1)	24

PROCEDURE

The process of this qualitative study was given in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *The Research Process of the Study*



DATA COLLECTION

In the fall semester of the 2021-2022 academic year, face-to-face education has started again in higher education in Turkey. And so, data were collected during face-to-face education. Data were collected through two semi-structured interview forms prepared by researchers based on expert opinion. In preparation stage of interview forms the views of two experts in Educational Science Department were consulted. According to the expert opinion, the interview form was reorganised. In this context, the first two open-ended questions were modified. Then the interview form was piloted two undergraduate students. Considering the results of the pilot study, the interview form was finalized. In the first interview form, there were five factual questions aiming to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants such as gender, residency, income rate, age, and grade. The second form consisted of three open-ended questions. These questions were as follows: (1) What are the challenges you perceive in distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic? (2) What are your views on the inclusive of distance education practices during the COVID-19 pandemic? (3) What would you suggest in increasing the inclusivity of distance education? In the first stage, the face-to-face interviews with the first group (RS) were scheduled and lasted in four weeks. In the second stage, the interviews with the second group (US) were scheduled and lasted in five weeks.

Before the interviews, a brief explanation about inclusive education was given to each participant. In a private office, each participant answered open-ended questions during face-to-face interviews, each lasting 30-40 min. Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, health and hygiene rules were followed at the highest level during the interviews. During the interviews the responses of participants were recorded. In the third stage, information from observation results during online courses were compared with the information provided by interview records. In fourth stage, focus group discussions were conducted with a selected group consisted of six participants. As a result, it was aimed to examine the subject in depth in accordance with the nature of the qualitative research paradigm, using different data collection techniques.

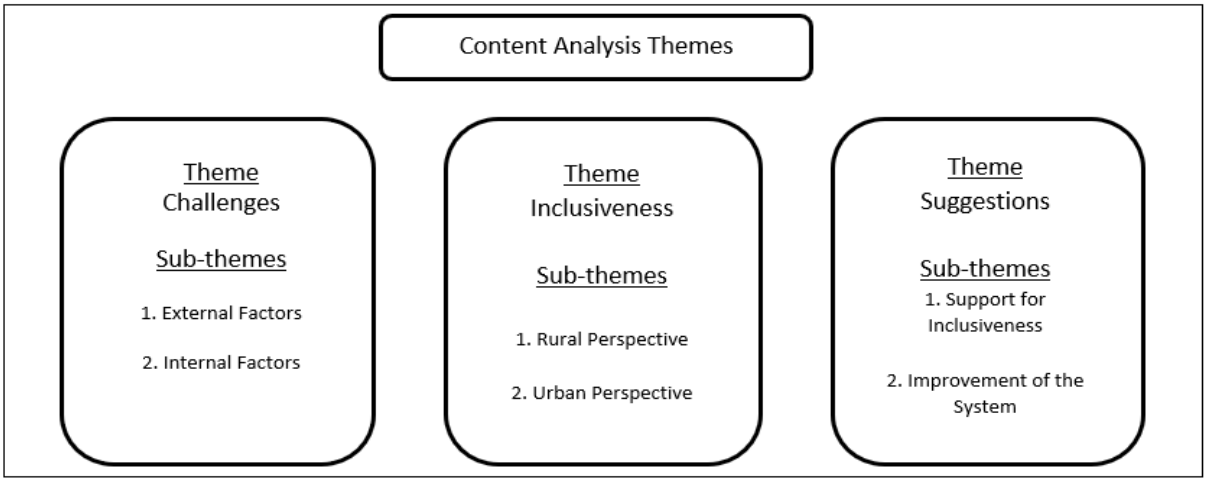
DATA PROCESSING

In this research, the seven-step data processing method developed by Rossman, and Rallis (2017) was adopted. This process was involved organizing, performing deep interpretation, creating

themes and categories, coding, writing analytical notes, presenting comments, and searching for potential meanings. In organizing stage, the interviews were read and re-read to understand the whole, that is, to gain a general understanding of what the participants were talking about. In the deep interpretation phase, the main points or ideas were examined in detail to get the ideas that the participants were really expressing. In creating themes and categories stage, the text was divided into smaller parts, namely, into meaning units. A theme can be seen as an expression or meaning unit including two or more categories (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). In coding phase, the meaning units was labelled by formulating codes and then grouping these codes into categories. In addition, the analytical notes were written in data processing. Writing analytical notes was considered as a critical aspect of effectively analysing qualitative data (e.g., key informant interviews, observations, focus group interviews, etc.). Essentially, the analytical notes provided the basis of our analyses that we would end up including in our final report. Moreover, the examples of quotations from as many participants as possible were given to help confirm the connection between the results and data as well as the richness of data (Elo et al., 2014). Finally, the potential meanings of expressions were searched for the deep analysis for inclusiveness of distance education during COVID-19.

Details of the themes are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. *Details of the Themes*



TRUSTWORTHINESS

The following strategies were used to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings: (i) Triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Multiple data sources were applied, including interviews, observations during online courses, and focus group discussions. (ii) Peer debriefing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009). A researcher with extensive qualitative research experience was invited to assist in the design of the study. (iii) Interrater agreement (Li & Li, 2020).

Researchers randomly selected 40% of the data from interviews, observations, and focus group interviews, and then an independent researcher recoded that data. The percentage of agreement of original coding data and recoding data between participants was 91% to 94%. The researchers discussed the inconsistent code and revised the codes together to ensure ultimate consistency.

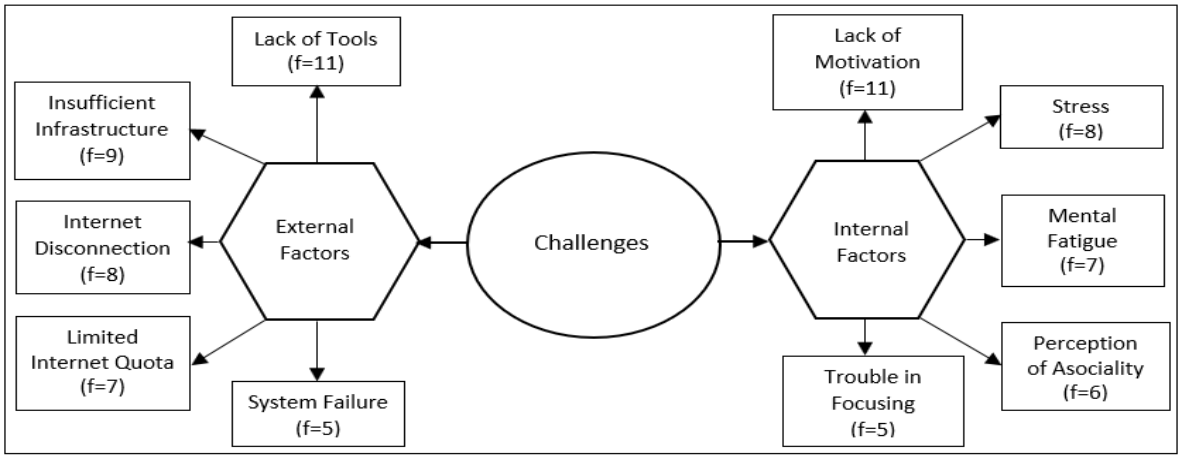
FINDINGS/RESULTS

THE CHALLENGES DESCRIBED BY THE PARTICIPANTS

The challenges encountered in distance education were evaluated regarding the perspectives of the participants living in rural areas and those living in urban areas. In this sense, the views differ according to the socio-economic background.

The sub-themes and codes regarding challenges main theme were shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. *Challenges During Distance Education*



In figure 3, two sub-themes were emerged related to the main theme of challenges. These sub-themes are external factors and internal factors. The external factors sub-theme includes the codes such as lack of tools, insufficient infrastructure, internet connection, internet quota, and system failure. The internal factors sub-theme includes the codes such as lack of motivation, stress, mental fatigue, and trouble focusing.

In Table 2, direct quotations related to the main theme of 'challenges' were included.

Table 2. *The Views Regarding the Challenges During Distance Education*

Codes	*Interview statements of participants from rural settlements (RS)*	*Codes*	*Interview statements of participants from urban settlements (US)*
Lack of tools	*P1-RS 'I have not a PC… it was very difficult to do homework by using mobile phone.'* *P7-RS 'My phone did not support the application… I had to follow the live courses using my mother's mobile phone.'* *P13-RS 'I live in a village… I could not benefit from the books and library while preparing my homework.'* *P18-RS 'I had to write my homework by hand… my computer was broken.'*	**Lack of motivation**	*P29-US 'The malfunctions in live courses made it difficult for me… I couldn't be motivated during distance education.'* *P23-US 'I did not have the opportunity to ask questions to the lecturers… I did not understand… That's why I wasn't motivated enough.'* *P22-US 'Many people from my close circle were affected from Covid-19… some of them died… I could not be motivated.'* *P38-US 'During the distance education, I could not be fully motivated to the lessons.'*
Insufficient Infrastructure	*P11-RS 'Since I lived in the village, I could not fully benefit from distance education… I tried to deal with the network problem.'* *P12-RS 'Since I lived in a village, insufficient internet infrastructure was a big problem.'* *P4-RS 'I live in the village, there is no internet infrastructure, so I have problems in accessing distance courses.'*	**Stress**	*K19-USA 'As the questions in the exams were more difficult, I panicked and felt stressed…the duration of the exams was very short.'* *P23-US 'I did not fully understand the topics… I was under stress because I would have responsible for these topics in the exam.'* *P34-US 'When I was at home, my family members had to go through the exam stress with me due to my visa and final exams…'*
Internet Disconnection	*P3-RS 'I haven't home internet connection… I could not link up to the distance education courses.'* *P6-RS 'I have not home internet connection…I tried to ensure internet connection by using mobile phone.'* *P17-RS 'Since I live in the village, I encountered the problem of internet disconnection in general.'*	**Mental fatigue**	*P28-US 'During the distance education process, I did a lot of homework for some courses, and I had a lot of mental fatigue.'* *P32-US 'Too much content for the courses was in the system… Having to learn these contents in a very short time tired me mentally.'* *P21-US 'I spent extraordinary effort to complete my homework, and it tired me mentally.'*
Limited internet quota	*P12-RS 'I used my mobile internet quota to connect distance education… It was not enough.'* *P14-RS 'Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we stayed in the highland… My internet quota was insufficient… I couldn't attend the live courses.'* *P15-RS 'I could not access live courses… I tried to connect through limited mobile internet quota in general.'*	**Trouble focusing**	*P31-US 'The Covid-19 pandemic process prevented me from focusing on the lessons…It reduced my academic success.'* *P37-US 'I followed the live courses in the home environment… I didn't focus on the courses because of the voices of the family members in the house.'* *P24-US 'Distance education was a troublesome process for me… I could not focus on exams… The neighbourhood I live in was too noisy.'*
System failure	*P2-RS 'There were too many technical failures in the system… I was constantly getting an error when logging into the system.'* *P5-RS 'There were interruptions in the voices of lecturers from time to time during the live courses.'* *P11-RS 'I encountered system related problems such as audio cuts and image freezes during the live courses.'*		

In Table 2, two sub-themes were determined regarding to the challenges main theme. These are 'external factors' and 'internal factors'. The external factors include challenges, which the participants encountered who living in countryside. The views indicated that the challenges such as lack of tools, infrastructure obstacles, internet connection problems, insufficient internet quota, and system failure made difficult to access distance education. These barriers can be considered to reduce the inclusiveness of distance education for rural participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

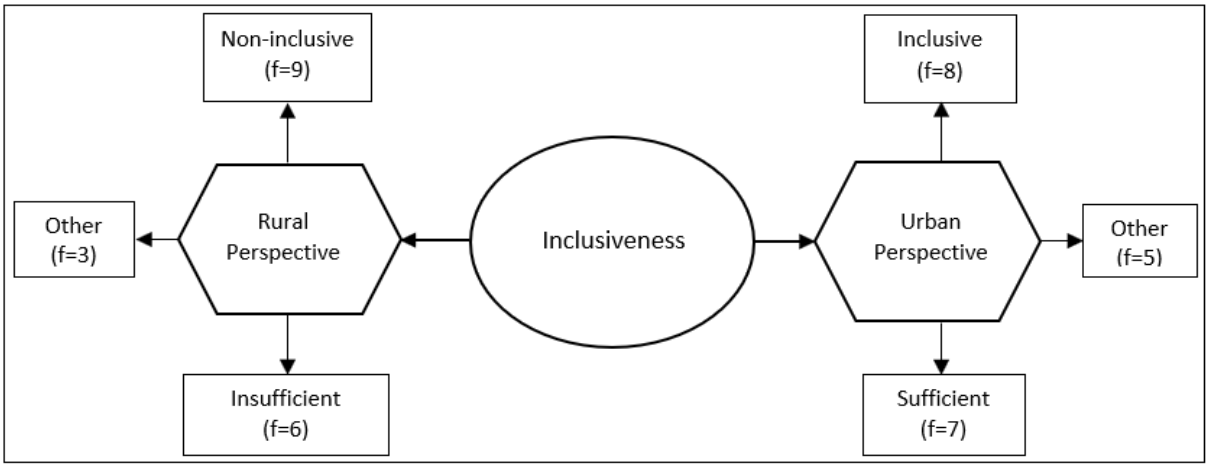
The participants who living urban settlements emphasized challenges related to the internal factors. These challenges are lack of motivation, stress, mental fatigue, and trouble focusing. Participants living in urban settlements probably also encountered system and infrastructure problems. However, their responses largely indicated psychosocial challenges. Direct quotations show that the participants living in rural areas face more difficulties in accessing distance education than participants living in urban areas.

THE INCLUSIVENESS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The inclusiveness of distance education were evaluated according to the perspectives of the participants both living in rural areas and living in urban areas. In this context, the views differ according to the socio-economic background.

The sub-themes and codes regarding inclusiveness main theme were shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. *Inclusiveness of Distance Education*



In figure 4, two sub-themes were determined related to the main theme of inclusiveness. These sub-themes are rural perspective and urban perspective. The rural perspective sub-theme includes the codes such as non-inclusive, insufficient, and other. The urban perspective sub-theme includes the codes such as inclusive, sufficient, and other.

In Table 3, direct quotations related to the main theme of 'inclusiveness' were shown.

Table 3. *The Views Regarding the Inclusiveness of Distance Education*

Codes	*Interview statements of participants from rural settlements (RS)*	*Codes*	*Interview statements of participants from urban settlements (US)*
Non-inclusive	*P1-RS 'I find it non-inclusive. There have been many things that I could not learn and understand. It was never a beneficial process for me.'* *P11-RS 'Distance education process was non-inclusive…. It didn't make any contribution to my learning.'* *P8-RS 'I am living in a village… I couldn't access online courses…I cannot say that distance education is inclusive.'* *P18-RS 'It was not an inclusive learning process… I couldn't access online courses… It was a waste time for me.'*	**Inclusive**	*P27-US '… distance education process carried out was quite effective... Given the pandemic conditions, it was inclusive.'* *P23-US 'It was inclusive...Such a system was established in a short time... we learned topics through live courses without any problems.'* *P29-US 'Although not as much as face-to-face training, distance education was useful…albeit partially, I think distance education is inclusive.'* *P26-US 'I could watch course replays whenever I want. I consider this system inclusive in terms of learning.'*
Insufficient	*P16-RS 'Compared to the face-to-face education, I did not find distance education effective in terms of academic achievements.'* *P12-RS 'Internet infrastructure was insufficient… I tried to connect to the online classes via mobile phone… It wasn't effective.'* *P7-RS 'I find distance education inadequate in terms of permanent learning… I don't think distance learning contributed anything to me.'*	**Sufficient**	*P38-US 'I think distance education is carried out effectively and efficiently in the context of theoretical lessons.'* *P33-US 'I think distance education is effective and applicable enough... It saved time... it was a good process for me.'* *P26-US 'It cannot be equated with face-to-face education… I think it was still effective and beneficial for the health of students and teachers.'*
Other	*P8-RS 'Face-to-face training is always more effective…I understood that the courses with mutual communication were more efficient.'* *P13-RS 'The distance education process has not been a very productive one...I think students were the most worn out in this process.'*	**Other**	*P32-US 'Students were given a lot of homework and responsibilities... I think students were the most worn out in this process.'* *P37-US 'It was very difficult to carry out group work with distance education, especially in applied courses.'*

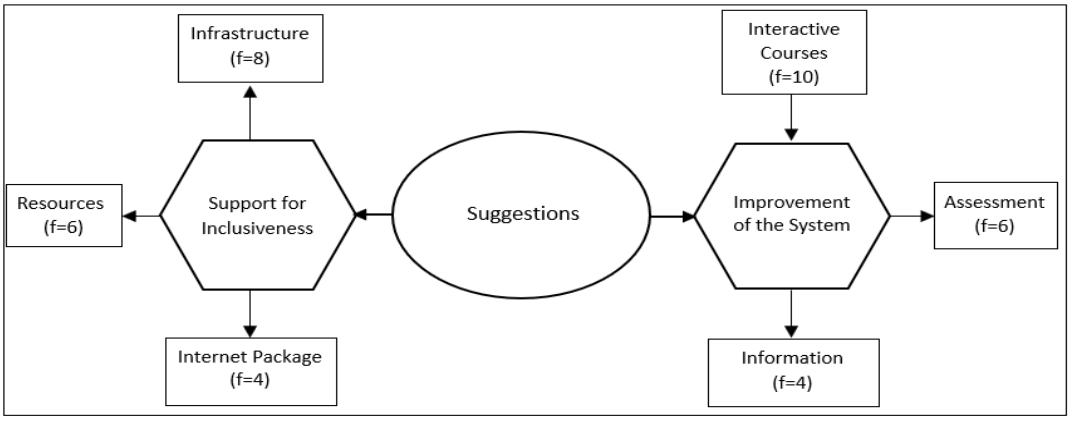
In Table 3, two sub-themes were determined regarding to the inclusiveness main theme. These are 'rural perspective' and 'urban perspective'. The rural perspective sub-theme is associated with the participants who living in countryside. The participants having rural perspective, stressed that they didn't find distance education process as beneficial regarding effective learning. In addition, direct quotations indicated that the participants who living in rural areas couldn't access online courses and so distance education didn't make any contribution to their learning. Moreover, the participants stated that they didn't find it effective because they could not access online courses.

The urban perspective sub-theme is associated with the participants who living in city centre. The participants who having urban perspective specify distance education as inclusive. Direct quotations show that they learned topics through live courses without any problems. Some participants find distance education partially inclusive. In addition, the participants who living in urban areas find sufficient distance education in the context of theoretical lessons. However, participants complained that in some courses were given too much homework. Direct quotations revealed that the participants who living in urban areas find distance education more inclusive than the participants living in rural areas.

THE SUGGESTIONS FOR INCLUSIVENESS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The suggestions for inclusiveness of distance education were evaluated regarding the perspectives of the participants both living in rural settlements and living in urban settlements. The sub-themes and codes regarding suggestions main theme were shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. *Suggestions for Inclusive Distance Education*



In figure 5, two sub-themes were emerged related to the main theme of suggestions. These sub-themes are 'support for inclusiveness' and 'improvement of the system'. The support for inclusiveness sub-theme includes the codes such as infrastructure, resources, and internet package. The improvement of the system sub-theme includes the codes such as interactive courses, assessment, and information. In Table 4, direct quotations related to the main theme of 'suggestions' were presented.

Table 4. *The Views Regarding the Suggestions for Inclusive Distance Education*

Codes	*Interview statements of participants from rural settlements (RS)*	*Codes*	*Interview statements of participants from urban settlements (US)*
Infrastructure	*P2-RS 'The problems of the distance education system should be eliminated in a short time. Internet infrastructure should be strengthened.'* *P10-RS 'An infrastructure that everyone can access to the system can be established instead of the existing application.'* *P7-RS 'Internet infrastructure of rural settlements should be strengthened for an inclusive distance education.'*	**Interactive courses**	*P23-US 'Interactive courses can be conducted... Students can ask questions about subjects they do not understand.'* *P32-US 'For a more effective and participative learning environment, students may be required to open cameras and actively participate in courses.'* *P24-US 'I understood that the courses with mutual communication are more efficient... Online courses can be conducted in two-way interaction to ensure inclusiveness.'*
Resources	*P1-RS 'In order for distance education to be inclusive, students living in rural areas should be provided home internet package and laptop.'* *P3-RS 'Open access e-libraries can be established... Students living in rural settlements can be given free tablet computers.'* *P11-RS 'For inclusive distance education, online courses can be given to everyone by using different materials.'*	**Assessment**	*P31-US 'To reinforce learning, short-answered questions can be asked… Multiple-choice tests can be recommended to reinforce understanding of students.'* *P28-US 'During the distance education process, students were given a lot of homework… Less homework can be given to increase inclusiveness.'* *P38-US 'Being connected to the screen for a long time reduced my motivation…Courses can be taught in small groups to ensure inclusiveness.'*
Internet package	*P17-RS 'To ensure the inclusiveness of distance education free internet package support can be given to students.'* *P1-RS 'Internet package support can be provided for students living in low socio-economic conditions.'*	**Information**	*P35-US 'The day and time of online courses should be informed at least one week in advance to ensure inclusiveness.'* *P32-US 'Students should be informed about the shortcomings of the homework they prepared and given time for correction…'*

In Table 4, two sub-themes were determined regarding to the suggestions main theme. The direct quotations regarding support for inclusiveness sub-theme is relevant with the strengthened of internet infrastructure. It is also associated with home internet package, free tablet computers, laptop, and free internet package for the students from low socio-economic background. The direct quotations regarding improvement of the system sub-theme emphasized on interactive courses, assessment of learning, and giving information to students about the schedule of on-line courses. While the participants living in rural areas mostly expressed suggestions for reducing the barriers to their participation in online courses; the participants living in urban settlements offered suggestions for more effective learning in distance education.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to determine the regional challenges for inclusive distance education during COVID-19 pandemic. From the perspectives of the participants who living in rural settlements (RS) and those living in urban settlements (US) different views was examined regarding inclusiveness of distance education practices during COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the participants from rural settlements (RS) reported more challenges and more barriers regarding inclusive distance education and had less support than the participants living in urban settlements (US). In addition, participants from both rural and urban settlements notified many challenges they encountered during distance education. The participants from rural settlements proclaimed that these challenges emerged from external factors. They reported that they did not have the opportunity to access online courses due to the insufficient internet infrastructure and limited mobile internet quota. Moreover, lack of the tools (e.g., tablet, laptop, mobile phone, books, home internet etc.) made more difficult this process for them. However, participants from urban settlements specified the challenges stemmed from internal factors. In general, they reported psychological challenges (e.g., lack of motivation, stress, trouble focusing, mental fatigue etc.). In literature, there are the studies including similar findings. Most of these studies emphasized on the effect of psychological factors on the success of distance education. Ozturk et al. (2020) assert that the pandemic process has significant psychological effects on individuals. Hargreaves (2020) states that during the pandemic process, students who stay at home for a long-time experience negative emotions caused by the deprivation of teacher and peer support. According to Keller and Suzuki (2004), motivation plays a major role in success of online learning. Similarly, Keller (2008) assert that motivation has a great effect on success of distance education. Shroff and Vogel (2009), emphasized on intrinsic motivation. However, Tekin (2020) found that intrinsic motivation of students was lower than their extrinsic motivation during the pandemic process. Paulus and Scherff (2008) emphasize that students have focusing problem during online courses. Moreover, the quality of the e-learning platforms increases the performance and motivation of students (Cidral et al., 2018; Ghazal et al., 2018).

In distance education process, the opportunity to access technological devices affects the academic attainments of students (Robinson et al. 2018; Roche, 2017). Furthermore, all of these challenges seriously affected the inclusiveness of distance education for all students during COVID-19 pandemic (Saavedra, 2020a, 2020b; Saran, 2020). The longstanding disparity between rural and urban education, (e.g., funding sources and educational outputs), has been carefully examined by researchers (Hannum & Wang, 2006; Postiglione, 2006). Turkish researchers have also reported significant rural-urban disparities in distance education during COVID-19 pandemic. Karahan et al. (2020), found that since the insufficient internet infrastructure, the students living in rural settlements did not access online courses during pandemic. Moreover, Zan and Zan (2020), specified that in rural settlements the students had problems in accessing online courses due to limited internet quota.

Participants who living in rural settlements of socio-economically disadvantaged regions stated that distance education was not inclusive during the pandemic process because they could not access online courses. In addition, they agree that online courses are ineffective because they cannot benefit

from distance education opportunities during the pandemic process. Furthermore, the inequality and lack of inclusiveness of distance education practices cause serious problems in accessing education. The most important aspect of these problems is that when there is no equal access to technology, the phenomenon known as 'digital divide' occurs and the inequality between technology users and non-users increases (Yildiz & Akar-Vural, 2020). However, the participants living in urban settlements stated that they benefited from online courses sufficiently during the pandemic process and therefore, they found distance education positively in terms of inclusiveness. Although COVID-19 pandemic process causes many problems in education, this process may also create some new opportunities such as new education perceptions, alternative education structures, learning-teaching skills, parent participation, and school management skills (Sari & Nayır, 2020). Almaiah (2018) had stated that functional and accessible e-learning platforms were important in success and inclusiveness of distance education. In this regard, Daniel (2020) emphasised on more flexible and systematic solutions. According to Winthrop (2020), the pandemic process should be seen as an opportunity regarding inclusive learning approaches and accessing online courses in teaching. Otherwise, school closure will cause learning losses. Moreover, inequality to access online courses will decrease the inclusiveness of distance education.

The participants made some suggestions for more effective distance education practices. These suggestions differ in terms of rural and urban perspectives. In rural perspective, these suggestions emphasize on support for inclusiveness including improvement of infrastructure, providing resources, and internet package. However, in urban perspective, the suggestions were made regarding improvement of the online education system. These suggestions include active participation of students, assessment of student learning, and information of schedule. Since these suggestions were made by the participants who witnessed the distance education application they may be considered as very useful for decision makers and practitioners. In previous studies, similar recommendations were made to increase effectiveness and inclusiveness of distance education. In a study conducted by Durak et al. (2020) the participants recommended to establish a qualified and functional infrastructure in distance education. Karahan et al. (2020) state that for online education to be effective, interaction-based student participation should be ensured and lessons should be planned effectively. Cakın and Kulekci-Akyavuz (2020), propose support, which include to provide technological tools for students, free and unlimited internet for students and parents to increase the effectiveness of distance education. Thus, the rate to access lessons will increase. TEDMEM (2020) report has different recommendations such as to strengthen digital infrastructure and to establish effective online learning network for inclusive distance learning in higher education. Moreover, the report has further recommendations such as to identify students with disabilities, to provide technological devices and internet connection, and to guide faculty members in distance education.

During face-to-face education, the participant observation results revealed that distance education was still not inclusive enough. Due to limited internet quota or lack of notebook computer most of students are not able to follow the live lessons. On the other hand, in focus group discussion process participants stated that they were bored because the lessons were not taught interactively. On the other hand, the participants stated that the lecturers only read certain texts during the distance education process, and they were insufficient in learning by question-and-answer method, discussion method, using visual materials, and creating questions at the end of the lesson. In addition, interactive learning applications with rich materials such as Web2 and Web3 tools are quite few.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants living in rural settlements with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds have encountered many challenges in distance education. An important reason for their unsuccessful access to online courses is the lack of internet quota. Therefore, distance education is seen non-inclusive by the participants from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Currently, these challenges are continuing in higher education because 40% of lessons are still lectured by using

online education system in Turkey. Moreover, undergraduate students made suggestions to make distance education applications more inclusive and effective during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are significant suggestions include to ensure internet package support, to provide resources for students, and to improve internet infrastructure. In conclusion, these suggestions aim to increase the inclusiveness and quality of distance education.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It should be notified that there were limitations in terms of method and research questions directed to undergraduate students in this study. These limitations can be overcome by different working groups and method variations. On the other hand, examining the inclusiveness of distance education only in the context of the undergraduate students' views can be seen as another limitation. The researchers tried to reduce the effect of this limitation by selecting study groups from different socio-economic backgrounds. Depending on the results, it may be stated that strengthening the technical infrastructure will be beneficial to increase the inclusiveness of distance education. In addition, internet access may be facilitated throughout the country, and provide students tools and equipment as well as internet package support. During COVID-19 pandemic, the lecturers may conduct interactive online courses, and may use Web2 and Web3 tools as possible as to ensure effective learning. Further research may be conducted with different working groups on the inclusiveness of distance learning during COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the model proposals may be developed by researchers on inclusive distance education.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

First author have been involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content The first author have also given final approval of the version to be published. The second author have made substantial contributions to collect data, conception and design, acquisition of data, and analysis and interpretation of data.

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