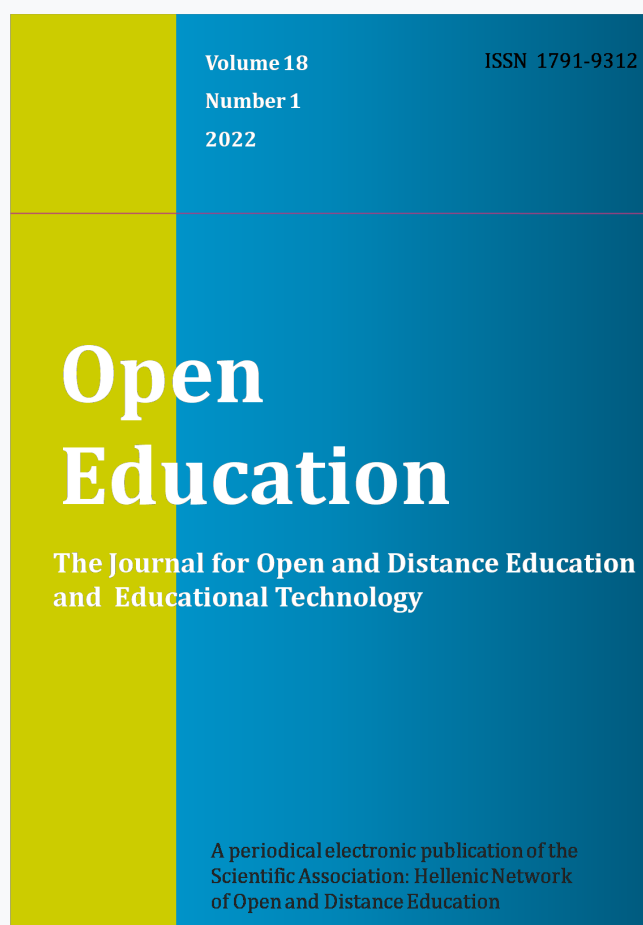


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Teachers' views on school distance education Potential - limitations - suggestions

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Potential and limitations of the application of school distance education in Greece through the views of teachers

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Abstract

This present study focuses on the views of secondary school teachers about the potential of implementing school distance education in Greece. During the spring of 2020, due to the pandemic of Covid-19, distance education filled the gap created by the suspension of operation of school units. An empirical research was conducted on ten teachers in the prefecture of Ioannina using the semi-structured interview tool. The research findings show that teachers value positively the free access and flexibility provided by distance education. It is also noteworthy that they believe that school distance education should be institutionalized to meet emergencies. However, they are wary against self-sufficient distance education in conditions other than emergencies. Finally, they consider that supplementary use is in some cases necessary to support knowledge and consider that mixed education can be used in adults courses or in children who are absent due to health reasons.

Keywords

School distance education, secondary education.

Introduction

The Covid – 19 pandemic of spring of 2020 changed the educational conditions worldwide. Many educational institutions and bodies suspended their operations for reasons of public health protection and used distance education in order to continue the educational process (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). Thus, under health constraints circumstances, distance education has offered open and free access to all levels of education worldwide.

The transition from the conventional classroom to school distance education was abrupt as in Greece there was no previous experience. Essentially, in the field of school distance education, a few studies and pilot applications had been made by Universities and Educational Institutions (Manousou 2004; Miminou & Spanaka, 2016). Although research data have shown that these pilot applications have positive effects on the performance, self satisfaction and critical thinking of students, school education has not been institutionalized (Anastasiadis, 2017; Kelenidou Antoniou & Papadakis, 2017; Makrodimos, Papadakis & Koutsoumba, 2017; Papanikolaou & Manousou, 2019; Skoularidou & Mavroidis, 2016).

As an outcome, without educational planning at the national level and without previous experience, it took some time for teachers to adapt to this new educational reality. They worked long hours, asked for help from the School Support Groups, attended trainings, were supported pedagogically and scientifically by the

Coordinators of each specialty, collaborated with each other and exchanged ideas. Without being trained in the methodology of distance education and without knowing its philosophy, they sought a way to organize their lessons pedagogically in an electronic environment. However, according to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, they managed to meet and operate their digital classrooms (<https://www.minedu.gov.gr/rss/44812-05-05-20-afksanomeni-i-antapokrisi-stin-eks-apostaseos-ekpaidefsi>).

Theoretical framework

The beginnings of distance education can be traced back to the 19th century and are related to the support of students in remote areas which lie far from urban centers. Thus, there are countries with extensive experience in this field. One may mention as indicative examples the Distance Education Center Victoria in Australia, Fraser Valley Distance Education School in Canada, Correspondence School in Wellington, New Zealand, the National Center for Distance Learning (CNED) in France and the Deutsche Fern - Schule in Germany (Economou, 2017; Manousou, & Lionarakis, 2007; Manousou, Kontogeorgakou, Georgiadi, E., & Kokkali, 2017).

Distance school education is defined as the provision of school education, primary or secondary, in a distance learning environment with the aim of obtaining a degree equal to the one provided by traditional school (Lionarakis, 1998). It can take three forms: complementary, which works supportively to the traditional school, autonomous, which operates independently and mixed / multiform / combined education (Miminou et al., 2016).

More broadly, distance education provides free access by removing geographical, economic, social, age and other constraints and it also provides flexibility (Brauner, 1989; Zorba, 2017 Skoularidou et al., 2016; Tzemou, 2013). At the same time, distance education also means that the educational method is characterized by diversity and complexity. It uses special teaching material and supportive means of activating learning and new technologies, as teacher and trainee are placed apart, at least in terms of space and time.

In general, in order to understand distance education, one has to study its philosophy, as it is performed in a different context than the conventional class. Distance education seeks to achieve open, free and unhindered access, in cases where access to conventional education does not exist (Brauner, 1989; Georgopoulos, 2002). It is worth noting that in order to achieve the ideal of openness, remote services and applications are used (Tzemou & Sofos, 2013; Tzifopoulos, 2016).

Distance education is a comprehensive training methodology. According to Sofos & Kron (2010), there is a quadratic relationship in distance education between the instructor, the learner, the educational material and the medium. The trainer is the mentor, the coordinator and the advisor. The role of the trainer is to encourage and inspire the learners, try to make them actively participate in the learning process, interact with the educational material and provide them with support and feedback (Amorgianioti, 2020; Collis, 1996). Although the trainee is in constant communication and is guided by the instructor, he does not lose his autonomy (Keegan, 1998; Keegan, 2000). Meanwhile, educational material is the main component and the guide of the learning process, because it encourages active participation and helps the development of creativity (Holmberg, 1995; Lionarakis, 2001). Communication between teachers and learners in distance education can be characterized as two-way and necessary (Garrison and Shale, 1987). It is achieved

mainly through the use of technology. Learning and teaching may be achieved with the use of multifaceted educational material. This type of education and has been characterized as multifaceted (Lionarakis, 1998).

A review of the literature on a form of complementary distance school education in Greece shows that it increases active involvement, uses collaborative learning and has positive effects on children's performance (Manousou, 2004; Miminou et al, 2016). In fact, there is an improvement in children in terms of the desired results and characteristics, as the development of critical thinking and the development of innovative action has been reported (Papanikolaou, 2019). Also, there is a development of interpersonal relationships and acquisition of social skills among students (Anastasiadis, 2017; Manousou, 2004). Through this way of working, the processes of self-learning and self-regulation are activated. Finally, engaging in technology contributes to the acquisition of digital skills (Manousou, 2004;).

A review on recent literature regarding distance education during the pandemic has shown that many problems are recorded in many countries, in Asia, Africa, Europe and America (Lagi, 2020; Belay, 2020; Sahin & Shelley, 2020; Jameson, Stegenga, Ryan & Green, 2020). These problems include lack of training equipment and internet, isolation, lack of pedagogical knowledge in the field of distance education by teachers, digital evaluation and monitoring of the procedures from Governments. At the same time, the lack of special attention to social inequalities and to the democratization of knowledge is pointed out (Belay, 2020). Some researches suggest that the primary disadvantage of synchronous learning refers to technology, the speed of the Internet and that there is not enough interaction, while the disadvantages of asynchronous learning is that students may feel that they are not in school and that they are self responsible for learning (Kimmel, Carpinelli, Spak, & Rockland, 2020). Other researches address the challenges faced by children and their families as parents were called upon to meet more educational needs (Yucesoy-Ozkan, Kaya, Gulboy, Altun & Oncul, 2020). Many teachers were caught unprepared with regard to the use of technological devices, applying teaching field skills through distance education and conducting remote student assessments. In addition to dealing with distance education, teachers had to deal with the social and psychological difficulties of the pandemic in their lives, as school social activities were lacking (Yucesoy-Ozkan et al., 2020). These problems are thought to have affected the effectiveness of distance education.

Conclusively, the question that arises is what the Greek educational world has managed to gain from distance education in the Covid-19 era and how it sees the future of distance education. In other words, it is of great research interest to examine teachers' views on its application potential. By investigating the conditions under which it operated and identifying the benefits and difficulties, conclusions could be drawn that would guide education policies in the right direction. Furthermore, the results will contribute to the improvement of the provided educational work and the evolution of the pedagogical science.

Goal, research questions and objectives

The purpose of this study is to explore the potential of applying distance education independently or in complement to the secondary level in Greek public education. It should be noted that this is a case study examining the application of distance education in Greece during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the application mentioned, a discussion is included and proposals are made.

The research objectives are formulated as follows:

- *Explore the needs that distance education could meet.*
- *Record the problems-weaknesses presented during the implementation of the school distance education*

Based on the purpose and objectives, the research questions are as follows:

- *What is the potential of implementing school distance education?*
- *What problems arise during the implementation of school distance education?*
- *How do the teachers evaluate distance education in this short period of time?*

Research method

Sample

The method used to conduct the empirical research was the qualitative approach using a semi-structured oral live interview. In particular, the choice of this approach was made based on the subject under investigation and the research questions, as qualitative research is offered for questions that require in-depth investigation and understanding (Creswell, 2011). Ten (10) public education teachers from the prefecture of Ioannina were selected as informants (four philologists, three mathematicians and two physicists, two biologists), who conducted teleconferences for 12 teaching hours per week. These teachers had no previous experience in distance learning except as trainees. Of the 10 informants, four were men and six women and their participation was voluntary. Teachers were asked to answer questions from a semi-structured interview on the implementation of distance education in secondary education. The questions were open-ended for a holistic approach to the subject (Creswell, 2011). The interviews took place between 15 and 30 September 2020 and lasted an average of 45 minutes.

Data Collection Tool

This research was conducted by constructing a tool with open-ended questions that emerged from the study of the literature (Anastasiadis, 2017; Economou, 2017; Manousou et.al, 2007; Manousou et al., 2017). Concerning the identification and record of the views of teachers about distance education, we focused on certain areas according to the literature in order to specify the proposed characteristics (Brauner, 1989; Zorba, 2017 Skoularidou et al., 2016; Tzemou, 2013). The following table shows the areas in which we focused, in order to detect the possibility of expanding access to education.

Table 1. The potential of implementing distance education

1	The teachers' experience
2	Benefits
3	Difficulties
4	Application possibilities

Validity and reliability

Concerning the reliability of this research, member checks were conducted. The data collected in the field (transcribed interviews), as well as the interpretation and discussion of the research findings, related to the participating teachers, were submitted back to them in order to verify their reliability (Hasas, 2003). Meanwhile, persistent observation was used so as to identify those characteristics of the group under study that are closely related to the purpose of the research and point out individual details. It is also worth mentioning that research ethics were preserved.

The method used for the analysis of the responses

Concerning the qualitative approach, content analysis was performed "as a research technique for systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of data arising from various communication circumstances" (Athanasiou, 1997). Content analysis allows the systematic investigation of the text under consideration in its entirety and the clear identification of the categories used to classify and analyze data (Kyriazi, 2002). Thus, the phrases and words that contain information related to the research questions are recorded, analyzed and interpreted (Athanasiou, 1997).

Main findings and discussion

The teachers attitude towards distance education

Table 2 shows that eight out of ten teachers described their experience in distance education as positive and interesting. Although the course of events was rapid due to the pandemic and the fact that the Greek education system was unprepared, they positively appreciate the possibilities provided by distance education. Therefore all opinions converged to the fact that it was necessary, as it was imposed by the health conditions of the pandemic, describing it as demanding and time consuming and requiring in advance pedagogical planning. However, they estimate that it gave open and free access where other means of access to education do not exist. Everyone, as they explained, took on very different roles than the conventional classroom teacher, but for six of them this was a pleasant surprise due to flexibility. Two people spoke enthusiastically about the "educational revolution" when comparing it to the traditional classroom and teacher-centered teaching. Furthermore, most agreed that they used a different approach to their subjects, a holistic and thematic approach. Some feel that they have evolved pedagogically with distance education as they have used more active teaching techniques. Finally, seven out of ten spoke about regular feedback and evaluation, describing the procedures they followed.

Two teachers took a very cautious attitude towards distance education and described in detail their fears. Thus, they characterized their experience as satisfactory with multiple difficulties. They referred to their fears about the closing of schools and pointed out that distance education lags compared to school life and classroom teaching. One teacher said that everyone should be trained in distance education, since it is a field of pedagogy and wondered about the professional development of teachers. He characteristically explained: "since distance education exists as a methodology ,why not know about it before we find ourselves in this need ... it concerns us all and I believe that it provides capabilities, which we can use ..." It is noteworthy that even teachers who spoke enthusiastically about this experience always noted either at the beginning or at the end of their answer that distance school education could not replace school. It is considered as an alternative for an emergency. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the responses confirmed that distance education provides flexibility and free access despite the limitations (Brauner, 1989; Zorba, 2017 Skoularidou et al., 2016; Tzemou, 2013).

Table 2: Teachers attitude towards distance education

Teachers' experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive (8) • “educational revolution”, digital educational leap” (2) • interesting challenge (8) • pleasant surprise due to flexibility (6) • imposed by needs (10) • satisfactory with multiple difficulties (3) • holistic approach to the cognitive (4) • demanding, time consuming (10) • requires pedagogical planning (10)
justification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multiple roles by the teacher (9) • requires regular feedback-evaluation (7) • different pedagogical approach (6)

Table 3: Excerpts from teachers' views (teacher specialty in parentheses)

“... I liked distance education, as I think it helped me pedagogically to develop myself and think about things that in the classroom had not bothered me or had not bothered me so much, for example interaction ... ” (Physicist)

“... finally an educational revolution, so many years behind the chair or writing on the board with the back turned to the students ... we talked endlessly about things that we were not able to visualize .” (Philologist)

“It was a difficult period but we managed, we worked and collaborated with each other ... my experience is positive ... I am glad that I had contact with my students, after so many restrictions ...” (Philologist)

“No, at least I do not want to conclude that distance education can be the same as classroom education, lets point it out ... yes we kept the students' ties with the school ... we did not move forward in learning ... we somehow repeated what we had taught in the classroom ”(Physicist)

“We approached the same issues more comprehensively, we had supervisory material that we projected and we meditated on experiences and knowledge that we had ... (biologist)

Benefits and advantages of distance education

Table 4 lists the main benefits of distance learning. In particular, the views of the teachers converged that they were primarily able to keep their students in touch with the educational process. All noted the opportunities for free and unhindered access provided by distance education during a health crisis, due to Covid-19. Some of them referred to flexibility and spoke enthusiastically. Furthermore, the majority agreed that they used a different approach to the teaching subjects but also promoted the cooperation between teachers. Likewise all the teachers stated that they improved their digital skills and were informed about various digital media. Two teachers said it was an opportunity to come up with great ideas that they did not have time to implement in the classroom. At the same time almost everyone enriched their material and specialized it in some cases. Also, the majority of them pointed out the use of active teaching methods, in order to involve students in the process, so that they do not remain silent people behind closed cameras. At the same time, seven of them reported that with the repetitions the students solved questions and consolidated parts of the material. Two people reported that digital scripts enabled children to delve deeper into the course material. At the same time, four teachers positively evaluated the exchange of views between each other about the subject, methods and teaching

techniques. It is worth noting that three teachers noticed that some students' interest in the lesson increased, which they attributed to the attractive electronic environment. In addition, five teachers believe that students have acquired more digital skills through this process. Finally, eight of these teachers felt that with some classes they were able to function as an e-learning community, a team that shares common goals and achieves the desired learning outcomes. This depended, they said, on the children's participation, as attendance was optional. This research confirmed the positive correlation between distance education and student performance (Anastasiadis, 2017; Kelenidou et al. 2017; Makrodimos et al. 2017; Papanikolaou, 2019 et al. ; Skoularidou et al., 2016). Students through new, more interdisciplinary pedagogical approaches had the opportunity to deepen their knowledge, repeat sections of the material and solve related questions. Therefore, research findings confirmed the literature that the teacher acts as an advisor, encourages active participation and helps the development of creativity (Amorgianioti, 2020; Collis, 1996). In essence, the teacher pedagogically organizes the educational environment and encourages active participation.

Table 4: Benefits and advantages of distance education

Benefits of school distance education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • free and unhindered access (10) • flexibility (6) • kept students in touch with education (10) • technological information (10) • cooperation (8) • different approach to knowledge (6) • interdisciplinary approach to knowledge (6) • active teaching methods (8) • material enrichment (8) • consolidation of material through repetitions (7) • delving deeper into course material, solving questions (2) • cooperation in pedagogical planning (4) • increased interest of some students (3) • development of students' digital skills (5) • e-learning community, team (8)
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Application difficulties

Regarding the problems that arise during the application of distance education, the research findings confirm analogous findings from other countries in the world (Lagi, 2020; Belay, 2020; Sahin & Shelley, 2020; Jameson, Stegenga, Ryan & Green, 2020). There have been challenges both for the students and the teachers. Lack of training equipment and internet, isolation, lack of pedagogical knowledge in the field of distance education by teachers, digital evaluation and monitoring of the procedures from Governments have been mentioned, among others, as serious problems. Table 5 presents the main difficulties encountered by teachers in the implementation of distance education. In particular, they all stated that they had no previous experience and training in distance education as trainers. Meanwhile the transition was imposed within a limited period of time. In fact, two people explained that time constraints increase the chances of mishandling. Also, as shown in the table, four people referred to the insufficient familiarity with technology and three to the lack of support from the School Support Groups and the Educational Project Coordinators. At the same time,

some of them reported that they bought a new computer or upgraded an older one in order to be able to respond. The majority referred to the insufficient technological equipment of students, teachers and schools. Furthermore, everyone agreed on the time-consuming processes of digitizing their material in an insufficient electronic environment, without the possibility of interaction and in general stressed that they had difficulty because there was no educational planning.

Five of them referred to the difficulties of implementing collaborative learning in an e-learning environment, to the time it took them to train their students and to the problem of social interaction. One person noted the lack of personalized learning and was concerned about mediocre and weak students who may eventually be lost, he said, if not properly supported. The majority agreed that they had difficulty with the closed cameras and that there was no eye contact and two spoke of a lack of emotion through the face of a screen. At the same time, three teachers stressed the absence of the paralingual elements of communication and posture, which can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Asked if they were concerned about who had access to distance education, several teachers showed keen interest in children and social groups who did not have the equipment and network. They noted that they themselves were in contact with these students, conveyed the problems to the school principal and were deeply concerned about these difficulties. All teachers consider that the responsibility for ensuring free access for all is a state responsibility and is difficult to resolve at the level of municipalities or schools. Finally, seven of the teachers commented that the social life of the school was missing.

Conclusively, teachers reported a variety of problems that are summarized in the absence of educational planning at the national level. They had to work long hours to digitize their material, get in touch with their students and start operating their digital classrooms. Another obstacle was the fact that the participation of the students was optional.

Table 5: Application difficulties

Difficulties and problems in the implementation of distance education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of previous experience (10) • lack of training (10) • short period of time (10) • lack of familiarity with technology (4) • insufficient technological equipment (8) • insufficient support (3) • digitization of material (10) • lack of distance learning material (8) • inadequate electronic environment (10) • there was no educational planning (10) • there was no capability for individualized learning (1) • cooperation is difficult (5) • interaction is difficult (5) • there was no eye contact (9) • the paralingual elements were missing (3) • lack of emotion (2) • body language was missing (3) • problematic access for socially vulnerable groups (6) • lack of school social life (7)
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Application possibilities

In order to position themselves more accurately, teachers were asked about their views on the two different forms of distance education, independent and complementary. As can be seen from Table 6, teachers appear positive in the application of complementary and wary of utilizing independent distance education. In particular, everyone agrees on the need to develop an educational policy in relation to school distance education, educational planning, appropriate distance education material and training of all teachers. However, they believe that independent distance education can only be applied to emergencies in order to manage a crisis. "The training should be ready for any eventuality ..." as was typically mentioned. When exploratorily inquired about other cases, they reject any other application to adults, employees, residents abroad or remote places, justifying that school and the presence of the teacher are irreplaceable dynamic elements of education. Three of them suggest that when, for some health reason, students are unable to come to school, independent distance school education might be used. This work is suggested to be performed by teachers with knowledge and experience in distance education in order for the educational process to be effective. It is noteworthy that they constantly stressed that this can not replace school life and the presence of the teacher, his speech, his attitude. Justifying that, they said that self-regulation and self-learning processes are required which children do not possess.

Regarding supplementary school distance education, teachers are positive and emphasize that it can work in two ways. In other words, they suggest that each teacher, depending on their needs, can use it to support their students. Also, it could also work a little differently, to have courses free for enrollment by anyone interested. Indicatively, a philologist suggested that there could be lessons in grammar, syntax, expression, creative writing in relation to the school material. At the same time, two people referred to the creation of courses that approach interdisciplinarily various social issues e.g. school violence, ecological problems and road safety education. Finally, seven teachers suggested using supplementary education in an institutionalized way in socially vulnerable groups and in order to support students in remote areas to eliminate inequalities. Developing their arguments, they spoke of the democratization of knowledge.

Regarding mixed learning, teachers consider that it can be applied in some cases, as shown in the table. Most estimate that it would have an effect on working adults who are unable to attend school. In addition, five out of ten believe that it could be applied to children who, for health reasons, are unable to attend for a period of time. Two people referred to the cases of residents abroad and one spoke about foreigners who are interested in finishing Greek school while working.

Table 6: Teachers' views on the applications of distance education

Independent school distance education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • development of educational policy (10) • educational planning (10) • properly designed educational material (10) • training of all teachers (10) • suitable for health reasons (3) • suitable in times of crisis(10) • can not replace school life (10) • can not replace the presence of the teacher (10)
Supplementary school distance education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-regulation and self-learning processes are required that children do not have (10) • widespread use (10) • optional (10) • support in certain teaching subjects (7) • individually and at national level (6) • free for enrollment by anyone interested (6)
Mixed / Multiform / Combined education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interdisciplinary approach to social issues (2) • support for socially vulnerable groups (7) • support for students in remote areas (7) • democratization of knowledge (7) • adults (8) • residents abroad (2) • adults, foreigners (1) • children who abstain due to health reasons (5)

Once again, the responses confirm the theoretical framework presented above. Distance education is a comprehensive training methodology that involves the instructor, the learner, the educational material and the medium (Sofos & Kron 2010). The findings of the research showed that teachers in our country have a positive attitude towards the methodology of distance education but are very cautious in the application of independent school distance education, referring mainly to pedagogical reasons. More broadly, they believe that distance learning offers flexibility, open and free access and they are interested in obtaining pedagogical training in it. They would like to continue to apply it according to the needs and interests of their class. They believe that it facilitates their work and supports the students. They believe that this crisis was an opportunity to work more student-centeredly and with collaborative learning. Regarding the difficulties and problems they faced, they attribute them to the lack of educational planning by the state. The pandemic found education in our country unprepared, they mentioned many times during the interview. There was time pressure but they estimate that they responded themselves.

However, teachers are negative about independent distance education, as they believe that it can not replace school and school life. Even if there is an educational policy that will include distance education and ensure its educational planning, digital media, educational materials and teacher training, they still are negative. Even if all the conditions for quality and effective learning are ensured, as they claim, the role of the school cannot be fulfilled. At the same time, they would like the supplementary distance education to support their educational work by strengthening the cognition and to help the school fulfill its educational mission by examining social issues of wider interest, for example with a distance vocational guidance program. They have a

more cautious attitude towards mixed distance education and consider that in exceptional and special cases it could be applied, for example, to working adults and residents abroad.

Most respondents believe that even adults need school social life. Regarding children, teachers estimate that they have not developed the processes of self-learning and self-regulation required by distance education. Overall, they demand from the state its institutionalization and planning so that in times of crisis it can fill the gap.

This research confirmed, what is already known, that distance education provides free access and removes geographical and other restrictions (Zorba, 2017 Skoularidou et al., 2016; Tzemou, 2013). The Covid-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools, keeping teachers and students away from any educational process. However, by utilizing distance education, the students' links with learning and school were maintained. The digital classrooms, despite their problems, were transformed into e-learning communities, as there was the advantage of these groups of people being acquainted with each other. They were classroom learning communities and continued to share common goals and learning outcomes in a different way.

Conclusions

Therefore, the main conclusions for distance school education can be summarized as follows:

- distance education was necessary, and imposed by the circumstances.
- distance education offered open access.
- it was an educational challenge.
- ties with the school were maintained.
- supported learning for a short time.
- faced multiple problems and weaknesses.

The attitude of teachers towards distance school education can be described as follows:

- negative, cautious, skeptical of independent distance school education.
- positive towards supplementary distance school education.
- partly positive towards mixed school education.
- positive in the methodology of distance school education.
- positive in the institution and planning of distance school for emergencies.

Therefore, it is suggested that the State should proceed with the immediate planning of distance education. Teachers need to be trained in the principles and methodology of distance education, informed about its philosophical background and familiarized with technologies. It is also necessary to configure the appropriate distance learning material, build an interactive electronic environment and familiarize students with the procedures of distance school education. However, this research contains methodological limitations, as it is based on a very small sample that has worked in synchronous distance education and does not allow for generalization of the conclusions. The research captures the experience of these teachers and their views on the role of distance education. Greater research is needed to record teachers' attitudes towards distance school education and to point out how it works during the pandemic. Also, interest could be drawn on researches that would try to examine the reasons why the teachers in our country stand so distrustful towards the independent distance school education.

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