

# READY TO LEARN ONLINE? LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN TURKEY

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DOI: 10.24989/ocg.v341.27

## **Abstract**

*This paper deals with the impact of Turkey's shift to remote learning after being hit by the Covid-19 crisis. It focuses on Turkey's official digital education platform, namely the Education Information Network (EBA), which is used to continue primary, secondary and high school education uninterrupted during the lockdowns.*

*The paper investigates the impact of online learning by looking at the issue from the perspective of the government as well as the perspective of the stakeholders, which are directly or indirectly affected by the change from face-to-face to online learning. It asks to what extent the government could pursue an inclusive education policy during the crisis.*

*As for the methodology, the paper employs document analysis and qualitative interviewing. The data are gathered from official state documents and a series of semi-structured interviews which were conducted with K-12 school teachers, students and parents in Turkey in January 2021.*

*The paper argues that Turkey could achieve the goal of maintaining the educational services during the crisis with its existing digital infrastructure. However, it is significant to overcome the digital divide for the empowerment of the ICT-based distance learning and the achievement of an egalitarian and inclusive education.*

## **1. Introduction**

In terms of its scale and scope the Covid-19 pandemic has become undoubtedly the most serious global crisis after the end of the World War II, having an impact on every aspect of human life. One of the most affected areas has been the national educational systems for it led country-wide school closures all around the world. As of 22 January 2021, there were 130 country-wide closures and 56.6 % of the total enrolled learners were affected by the pandemic [30]. Turkey has been one of those countries, where the primary, secondary and high school education went online.

Mapping out the opportunities and challenges of the instantaneous shift from classroom learning to online learning in pre-university, in other words, K-12 education during the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper attempts to display the impact of the advent of the ICTs on national education systems by focusing on the case of Turkey.

The paper asks to what extent the education policy of the Turkish government has been effective in responding to the coronavirus crisis. In this regard, it builds its theoretical framework on the concept of inclusive education in democratic societies. It argues that the pandemic has taught us the

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significance of developing robust national ICT policies for the proper functioning of online education policies and for equal opportunity in education in the Age of Information.

The method of the study is mainly based on qualitative content analysis of the official website of the Education Information Network, EBA, as well as the official reports of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). In addition, eleven semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted within the context of this study to gain the stakeholder insights, including the learners (students), teachers and supporters of learners (parents).

## 2. Theoretical Background

Children are the future of societies and states are as responsible as parents for their growing up as conscious citizens, since it is the task of states in democracies to provide every individual with basic education services. This makes inclusion in education not only a goal to achieve for states, but also a right to be demanded by its citizens. Each child matters in order to establish an education system involving equal opportunities.

Despite being accepted as one of the core elements of democracies, there is a lack of consensus on how to determine and measure “inclusive education” in the literature. Clough and Corbett identify five key perspectives on educational inclusion which emerged from the 1950s until the 2000s: The psycho-medical legacy, the sociological response, curricular approaches, school improvement strategies and disability studies critique [12]. Ainscow et al. argue that explicit definitions of inclusion in education are avoided in publications to leave some room for interpretation. They categorize the definitions as descriptive and prescriptive. A descriptive definition refers to “the variety of ways inclusion is used in practice, whereas a prescriptive definition indicates the way we intend to use the concept” [1]. UNICEF defines it in both ways as follows:

Inclusive education is the most effective way to give all children a fair chance to go to school, learn and develop the skills they need to thrive. Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded – not only children with disabilities, but speakers of minority languages too. Inclusive systems value the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and allow diverse groups to grow side by side, to the benefit of all [31].

Barton (1998) points out that inclusive education refers more than simply access for students into mainstream school. It refers to ensuring the participation of everyone by the removal of all forms of exclusionary practice. Thus, he defines the concept of inclusion in education as a process which necessitate a change in the existing education systems [3]. In his article which discusses “the main challenges in developing inclusive education” Haug argues that the goal of constructing an inclusive school system which fulfills the expectations of international organizations has not been achieved anywhere yet [18]. Cobigo et al. attempt to view social inclusion “from a developmental perspective”. In this respect, the goal of social inclusion of individuals can be achieved through increased opportunities to interact with others and participate in activities, and therefore gaining sense of belonging and well-being [14].

Although there are diverse approaches to the concept of inclusive education, to have equal opportunities including the disadvantaged individuals in the society became one of the commonly accepted criteria to check the quality of any education system in the world. In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic made it certain that the online education promises hope for removing physical barriers for equal opportunities in education as many countries continued their education online. However, it

brought about new kind of inequalities as well. Departing from the discussions of inclusive education in the literature this paper attempts to understand the opportunities and threats of online education in coping with inequalities and exclusion in school education in Turkey in the light of what we have learned from the pandemic so far.

### **3. The Evolution of Formal Online Education in Turkey**

#### **3.1. From Distance Learning to Online Learning**

Online learning can be considered as the last link in the chain of developments in the evolution of the distance education over the past three centuries. In the literature, the concept of distance education is traced back so far as the year 1728, in which private correspondence courses to teach shorthand were offered. In the 1900s and 2000s, parallel to the technological developments, radio and TV broadcasting, telephone, computer and the Internet were used respectively as means of distance education [24]. With the widespread use of the Internet, online distance learning has become increasingly popular, particularly in higher and adult education. Internet platforms offering online courses as well as universities offering undergraduate and graduate level degrees online have been multiplied, which was reflected by the increase in the number of scholarly works dealing with the issue of online learning. Over the last two decades the trends in K-12 online learning have been examined in scholarly articles with a wide range of focus from policies enhancing or impeding online learning to practical issues such as the technical infrastructure and the costs [2].

In this sense, it is significant to note that online learning is a much broader concept than sole internet technology. Along with the internet and computer technology, other dimensions such as legislative and bureaucratic issues, methodological differences, learning environment, teaching and learning capacity etc. should be taken into account. The success of online education depends on the harmonious co-functioning of all those factors.

#### **3.2. The Education Information Network (EBA) of Turkey**

There is a long history of distance education in Turkey in accordance with the evolution of distance education in the world. Bozkurt divides the historical development of distance education in Turkey into four periods. Accordingly, in the first period (1923-1955), distance education was discussed on a theoretical level. The second period (1956-1975) witnessed the early attempts of distance education in secondary education by correspondence. In the third period (1976-1995), audio-visual tools, in other words, radio and TV started to be used and distance education was expanded to higher education by the establishment of Turkey's first distance education faculty (Anadolu Üniversitesi Açıköğretim Fakültesi) serving to broader masses. Finally, in the fourth period (1996-present), ICT-based distance education emerged and became widespread [8]. In the 2020 Performance Program, in line with the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan, the MoNE listed a series of digitalization projects as mid-term and long-term goals to be achieved such as the e-School Project, MoNE Information Systems (MEBBİS) Application, Electronic Exam (e-Exam) Project, Improvement of the network infrastructure of the Provincial National Education Directorates and e-Guidance Project [21].

The Education Information Network, or simply EBA, can be considered as the latest point reached in the ICT-based education in Turkey in terms of its scope. It was launched by the MoNE in 2012 as a national online education platform targeting the participants of the primary, secondary and high school education in Turkey, including students, teachers and parents. It was put into practice within

the context of Fatih Project, which laid out five principles for success: accessibility, productivity, equality (equal opportunities), measurability and quality [20]. The aim was to “provide equal opportunities, eliminate the digital gap and enhance the quality, thanks to the solution that covers all success factors.” [20] On the EBA website the goals of Fatih Project are detailed and subcategorized as follows:

For every school:	VPN-Broadband Internet Access, Infrastructure, High Speed Access
For every classroom:	Interactive Board, Wired/Wireless Internet Access
For every teacher:	EBA Applications, EBA Market, Cloud Account, Sharing Course Notes
For every student:	EBA Market, Cloud Account, Digital Identity, Sharing Homework, Individual Learning Materials

**Table 3.2: The Goals of Fatih Project**

Source: [20]

The Fatih Project started as an ambitious project, which aimed to make a revolutionary change in education in the age of digital transformation. On the EBA website, Fatih Project is claimed to be “the greatest and the most comprehensive educational movement implemented for the use of educational technologies” [20]. Yet, the outbreak of the pandemic has prepared the necessary conditions to test the efficiency of the EBA.

#### **4. Can Online Education Replace the Traditional One? An Experiment during the Covid-19 Crisis**

When the pre-crisis conditions are to be examined, the OECD’s country report<sup>2</sup> on the school education in Turkey prior to the pandemic gives an impression about the readiness of the country for online education. The report underlines that Turkey remains below the OECD average of 89 % with 67 % of students having a computer they could use for school work. This difference is even more prominent for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Only 36% of those students in Turkey reported having a computer they could use for school work, whereas the OECD average is 78 %. The report also points out that having a computer at home does not necessarily mean access if it has to be shared with other members of the household [26]. The OECD states that along with the access to the ICTs, an appropriate physical space for learning should be provided for an “adequate climate for home schooling” and reports that Turkey was below the OECD average (91 %) in terms of having a quiet place to study at home (87 %) [26]<sup>3</sup>. The percentage of parental support and assistance (87 %) was also lower than the OECD average (89 %) [26]. Keeping those results in mind it is hard to talk about the existence of optimum conditions prior to the pandemic since the presence of the ICTs and the Internet connection are two indispensable conditions for a countrywide online education.

Nevertheless, urgent and courageous action is needed in times of crisis and the MoNE decided to respond the Covid-19 Crisis with the EBA in order for approximately 18 million K-12 students (see

<sup>2</sup> The data presented in this OECD report were mainly drawn from the TALIS 2018 Database and the PISA 2018 Database.

<sup>3</sup> This percentage was even lower (77 %) for the students coming from the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution, whereas the OECD average was 85 %.

Table 3.3.) to continue their education. Virtual education was the only possible way to bring teachers and students together avoiding physical contact at schools. Consequently, all this turned out to be a proficiency test for the EBA and online learning on a national level. The success of the EBA also determines to what extent online education can present an alternative for the face-to-face education.

As of March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the MoNE announced the closure of the schools in Turkey due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the education was decided to be carried out remotely starting from March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020 [28]. Following the shift to distance learning the EBA TV was launched (on 23 March 2020) under the national broadcaster of Turkey, TRT, in order to broadcast school lessons. This was practiced through three separate channels for primary, secondary and high schools<sup>4</sup> [29]. Along with the EBA TV, the digital EBA system enabled live classes, where teachers and students could meet online as well as access to curricular content of lessons for each class [22]. Table 3.2. shows the distribution of the numbers of schools, students and teachers whom the EBA served by the end of the educational year 2019-2020.

	School Institution /	Students	Teachers
Total of Formal education	68.589	18.241.881	1.117.686
Public	54.715	15.189.878	942.936
Private	13.870	1.468.198	174.750
Open education	4	1.583.805	-
Primary School	24.790	5.279.945	309.247
Public	22.808	5.005.927	275.733
Private	1.982	274.018	33.514
Secondary Education	6.925	3.412.564	186.914
Public	3.443	1.866.616	120.219
Private	3.481	448.554	66.695
Open education	1	1.097.394	-
Vocational and Technical Secondary Education	4.470	1.608.081	144.255
Public	4.068	1.342.550	135.374
Private	401	108.918	8.881
Open education	1	156.613	-
Religious Education (High School)	1.651	610.007	49.462
Public	1.650	502.847	49.462
Open Education	1	107.160	-

**Table 3.3: Number of Schools, Students and Teachers in Education Institutions by Level of Education during the Educational Year 2019-2020**

Source: [19]

Perhaps the most controversial issue discussed about the EBA in the media, which is also the main concern of this paper, is the problem of access. As marked in Eđitim Sen's report (January 2021), 6 million out of 18 million K-12 students did not have access to the EBA for different reasons. Most of those students live in rural or poor areas [17].

In order to evaluate the overall performance of the online education experience during the pandemic, the next two sections examine the issue from two perspectives: the state's perspective, that is to say, how the state presents the EBA and the ICT-based distance education in general and

<sup>4</sup> Two hours per day have been given for each of the twelve classes. Since the education reform made in 2012 the so-called 4+4+4 education model has been implemented in Turkey. Accordingly, mandatory education lasts twelve years including 4 years of each of the two levels of primary school followed by 4 years of middle school education.

the stakeholders' perspective, that is, the perceptions of the main participants of the K-12 education in Turkey.

#### 4.1. The State's Perspective: The EBA as a Tool for Crisis Management

From the state's perspective, the EBA seems to meet the needs of the stakeholders in school education to a large extent. In general, an optimistic discourse is dominant in the official documents shared on the website of the MoNE and the statements of the Education Minister. Yet, a slight change in the discourse can be noticed when the three terms of distance education are compared.

In the first term, a more ambitious and success-oriented discourse, which tends to neglect the digitally haves and have-nots is prevalent. Many setbacks and inequalities stemming from the problem of digital divide are not emphasized in the state documents. The focus is rather on justifying what kind of policies have been implemented to maintain the educational services. This is also reflected in the statements of the Education Minister, Ziya Selçuk. In July 2020 in an open session on TV the Education Minister Selçuk responded to the criticisms by arguing that one should look on the bright side [13]. He maintained this attitude in the second term as well. After the EBA crashed on the second day of the 2020-2021 school year due to the density of concurrent users, Selçuk said "It is, in fact, good news for us because there is an incredible demand." [5] [25] [6] The MoNE's optimism was severely criticized by Eğitim Sen (Education and Science Workers' Union) for creating false perception in the society which gives the impression that everything is alright in education [16].

At the outset of the crisis in April 2020 Ziya Selçuk introduced the EBA as a "worldwide success" and stated that Turkey is, after China, the second country in the world which could provide nationwide remote education to all its people [11]. In his speech at the Turkish Grand National Assembly Ziya Selçuk presented the EBA as a success story underlining that with its capacity of hosting 3 million lessons (including live classes) per day the EBA was visited 12 billion 249 million times since March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, being the most visited online education platform in the world. He pointed out that Turkey is one of the four countries in the world, which could succeed in broadcasting in three separate channels for primary, secondary and high school education. He also emphasized that the EBA's AI-based virtual assistant, namely the EBA Assistant, received the world's first prize by answering ten million questions posed by over 2,5 million EBA users within six weeks [23] [22] [10]. Moreover, he claimed that the EBA guarantees equal opportunities and fairness in education in all parts of Turkey as everyone can access it regardless of socio-economic inequalities [11].

Nevertheless, the findings of a survey conducted by the Educational Volunteers Foundation of Turkey (TEGV) approximately one month after this statement draw a different picture. Accordingly, only 69 % of the students could follow the EBA regularly.<sup>5</sup> 2% did not follow the EBA at all and 6 % could only follow one or two times within 1,5 months. 83% of those students who followed the EBA regularly could watch the EBA TV and 47 % could access the online contents, whereas only 11 % could participate in live classes [27].<sup>6</sup> This means only a very limited

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<sup>5</sup> The report points out that the 66 % out of the 69 % spent only 1-2 hours per day.

<sup>6</sup> The survey was conducted with 368 children (80% of them 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> graders) from 31 cities in Turkey. All of those children were at public schools and coming from socially and economically disadvantaged regions. Their distance learning experience were solely based on the EBA.

number of students could listen to their teachers and interact with their classmates after the lockdown in the first months of the pandemic.

Another significant outcome of the survey is the access to the ICTS and the Internet. 50 % of the students used a computer, 59 % a mobile phone, 28% a tablet to follow the EBA. 4 % of them had no ICTs to use. 21 % of the students had no Internet access at home. Furthermore, 18 % of the students stated that although they had Internet access, either their quota was limited or the speed of the connection was not sufficient to follow the EBA [27]. Apparently, a considerable number of students could not reach the EBA services due to the digital divide in Turkey.

Ironically, in the digital booklet entitled “This Year in Education. 2020”, which presents the achievements of the MoNE from the beginning of the pandemic, Minister Selçuk states that the EBA is a great opportunity to achieve justice of opportunity in education as he introduces the updated version of the EBA with “Smart Suggestion System”, which offers a personalized learning environment [22]. Some of the other achievements listed in the booklet concerning the online education are summarized below.

In February 2020, the “MEB Agenda” and “e-School Teacher” were launched to support teachers, students and school principals in carrying out their daily work quickly and easily dealing with less bureaucracy [22]. In March 2020, the EBA Control Center was opened to monitor the distance education continuously and solve the problems experienced due to the intensity of the simultaneous use of millions of students [22]. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 the live classroom application, which enables interactive lessons by bringing teachers and students together, was launched as a pilot project for 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> classes [22]. In September 2020, at the beginning of the first semester of the Education Year 2020-2021 the 1420 “EBA Support Points” in 81 provinces were established in schools and institutions to enable students who do not have the opportunity to participate in distance education from their homes to benefit from the EBA [22]. At the same time, increasing 27 steps compared to the previous month the EBA ranked first in the world among all sites in the field of education according to the amount of use and internet traffic criteria. This increase in the use of the EBA was attributed to the improvements and infrastructure investments made during the summer term [22]. Another success story mentioned was the “I am Special, I am in Education” mobile application developed in April 2020 for students with special needs to increase their participation in distance education [22]. The application received positive feedback from the OECD for its contribution to the inclusion in education “effectively increasing the equity gap” [32]. In December 2020 the "Digital Literacy Teacher's Guide" was launched for teachers to support the effective use of the ICTs in teaching [22]. In addition, the third phase of the distribution process of 500 thousand tablet computers, which were supplied by the MoNE started and contracts were made with the GSM operators in order to provide the students with a monthly quota of 25 GB Internet service along with those computers, which they need to access the EBA platform and live classes [22].

As seen in the chronology of developments, the MoNE takes more initiatives to cope with the inequalities in online education in the second half of 2020 and the issue is more visible on its agenda. It declares its commitment to increase the number of the EBA Support Points (to 5200) [22], distributes tablet computers to families which have no computer at home, attempts to solve problems regarding EBA’s technical infrastructure through the EBA Control Center, makes deals with GSM operators to provide students with mobile Internet service and constantly launches new digital content.

The next section looks at the issue from the perspective of the stakeholders to be able to compare their expectations with the capabilities of the state.

## **4.2. The Stakeholders' Perspective: Qualitative Interviews with Stakeholders**

In January 2021, within the context of this study eleven semi-structured qualitative interviews with three teachers (primary, secondary and high school teachers), four students (2<sup>nd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades) and four parents were conducted. The interviewees come from different provinces of Turkey with different socio-economic backgrounds. The half of the students and one teacher among them are at private schools.

The interviews aimed to gain insights about the overall performance of the online K-12 education after the outbreak of the pandemic. In order to evaluate the impact of moving to online education, the stakeholders were asked to compare face-to-face education with online education and describe, what has changed for them. The interviews took place on the phone and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The data collected were coded into five main categories and analyzed by using analytic induction [9]. The results are summarized below.

### *4.2.1. The Quality of the Digital Content*

The majority of the interviewees were satisfied with the digital content of the EBA. Both the teachers and students stated that audio-visual materials on the EBA such as videos and games ease their teaching and learning process and make it more fun for everyone. The teachers were satisfied with the structure of the lessons which start with an introduction of the course subject and end with questions and answers allowing students to learn theory and practice together. The students stated that they find the EBA digital content particularly useful for repeating the lessons in which they have difficulties to learn quickly during the class. The teachers noted that the digital content saved them the time they spent in front of the photocopy machines for it is much easier and more environmentally friendly to upload and download course materials online.

Yet, the students also argued that keeping the course materials digitally sometimes prevented their freedom of learning since another family member used the device which they needed in order to reach those materials. All interviewees agreed on the fact that the content provided by the EBA should be supported by other materials and live lessons in order to gain deeper knowledge of the subjects. The most critical interviewee was a parent, who was concerned about the political motives embedded in the digital content. She argued that the pro-government ideology was trying to be imposed on students via the EBA contents. Thus, she was glad that her children went to a private school and did not use those contents there.

### *4.2.2. Learning Environment in the Live Classes*

One of the issues which was criticized by all interviewees was the learning ambiance in the EBA live classes. Although the students stated that they liked the increased flexibility in comparison to the traditional education, they had difficulties to concentrate on the lesson. The outside noises and interruptions during the classes as well as sharing no physical space with other classmates in the sense of a classroom played a big role in it. They also complained about the pace of the live classes. A student stated that the teachers are usually too fast because they want to be sure that they cover all the subjects in the curriculum. He said that there is no time to digest the conveyed information during the class and that is why teachers try to compensate it with a lot of homework.



This was a problem for the teachers as well. They said that they had to teach faster because although the duration of the classes was shortened, the curricular content they had to cover remained unchanged. All three teachers complained that some students did not turn on their web cameras and microphones, and pretended as if they were participating in the class while they were playing or doing something else. Teaching without eye contact and not knowing if the students really listened to them were great challenges for the teachers. One of the teachers said “I felt like I had no authority in my class since I had no control mechanism. I never felt this way in my 33-year-career as a teacher”.

The parents also confirmed that they often caught their kids playing computer games or chatting with their friends during the classes. A parent said “I have to admit that we, parents, also made mistakes. Once I let my son have his breakfast in the middle of his live class”. She also said that online education caused screen addiction. She could not prevent her children from sitting in front of a computer, tablet or smart phone screen for hours because they used their classes and homework as an excuse to play more computer games. Another parent argued that not only students but also teachers had a problem of discipline in live classes. He said that he saw his son’s teachers several times in jogging clothes while teaching and found it very distracting. He added that flexibility should not be confused with having no order. He observed that the teachers often changed the schedule of the classes spontaneously via WhatsApp which caused stress for the parents and students.

All of the interviewees agreed that lack of social interaction was one of the most significant disadvantages of the EBA live classes. The teachers explained that although they put lots of effort to increase the interactivity of their classes by teamwork, games, competitions etc., the students were reluctant to participate in the class voluntarily. Thus, the teachers had to ask questions to each student in order to find out how well the topic was understood.

#### *4.2.3. The Use of the ICTs*

There is a consensus among the interviewees on the significant contribution of the ICT use to their capacity of learning/teaching. The students mentioned several times that they learned much better from the audio-visual resources than textbooks. A student said that when she watched a video to learn a subject, she tended to remember it for a longer time.

The interviewees also emphasized the impact of the EBA experience on the improvement of their ICT skills. A teacher admitted that she was very nervous at the beginning when she learned that she had to teach online. She was not very familiar with computer programs and she thought she was too old to acquire the necessary ICT skills within a short time. However, at the end of the first term with the EBA, she came first in their school overtaking her young colleagues in terms of the frequency of activities she organized and information she shared on the EBA. She said that the EBA helped her gain the ICT skills, but above all, “digital self-confidence”.

Similar to teachers, the parents stated that they improved, thanks to the EBA, their ICT skills while helping their children with their homework or preparing the setup of the live classes. They started to use the ICTs more often to communicate with the teachers and other parents. The interviews also revealed that there was a considerable difference between public and private schools in terms of the communication between teachers and parents. The parents, whose children were in public schools, told that they had limited contact to the teachers, whereas the ones, whose children went to private

schools, were regularly informed by the teachers about their children and received guidance for home schooling.

#### *4.2.4. The Problem of Access and Attendance:*

All interviewees mentioned the problem of access to the EBA and low attendance during the live classes. Although they all had an available computer and access to the Internet, they stated that it was not the case for everyone in their class. The access problems occurred for three reasons:

- 1- Lack of Internet connection
- 2- Lack of ICT devices (or problem of sharing them with others)
- 3- Problems with EBA's technical infrastructure

The student interviewees told that they never saw some of their classmates since the beginning of the pandemic and some of their classmates only showed up irregularly. One of the teachers working at a public school said that he had four groups of students who did not attend his EBA classes: The ones who had no Internet access, the ones who had no device to connect or had to share them with their siblings, the foreign students who cannot speak Turkish very well and the ones who did not feel like attending at all. The first two groups, that is to say, the digitally have-nots were socio-economically disadvantaged students coming from poor families and districts or foreign students. The foreign students had to deal with language barriers in addition to the digital divide. Not surprisingly, the teacher and the student interviewees at private schools did not address the lack of access to the Internet and the ICTs as the reasons of low attendance in live classes. However, they highlighted the repeated problem of access to the EBA website as a reason why they did not use the EBA live classes, but instead other programs such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom to make live classes.

#### *4.2.5. The Problem of Accountability and Fairness:*

Examinations were what all interviewees were mostly concerned about in this system. They perceived it as a threat to the future of their educational life. The biggest reason for this concern was that everyone could profit from the EBA to a different extent, including the ones who did not use it at all, but they had to take the same exams to pass their classes and the marks they received from those exams would affect their whole life. They all argued that the EBA system lacked accountability since there is no efficient control mechanism which could check the real performance of the students. One of the students told that when they had an online exam, everyone in his class cheated, and therefore he cheated as well. On the other hand, he also found it unfair to learn online but having to take the exams physically at schools.

Shortly after the interviews were made, the MoNE declared that there will be no face-to-face exams in the new school term. Instead, the students will be graded depending on the frequency of logging into the EBA platform, the time they spent there and the performance of the homework they did in the system [7] [4]. However, this is also unfair for the six million students who did not have access to the EBA.

## **5. Conclusion**

Thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is no more science fiction to imagine that one day the mainstream education completely takes place virtually. This, of course, would not happen from one

day to the next, but the pandemic experience prominently accelerated the pace of digital transformation in education sector which has been taking place since decades.

In the case of Turkey, the online education through the EBA has served as a “one school for all” playing a central role in education during the pandemic. It would not have been possible to carry on education uninterruptedly without its assistance. Moreover, the EBA has changed the entire education landscape by presenting a potential education model which could be an alternative to the face-to-face education. It introduced the teachers and students with new teaching and learning methods and visibly improved their ICT skills.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has also taught us that the online education has not succeeded in realizing the ideal of equal opportunities in education. It has rather deepened the existing inequalities. Given that nearly one third of the students in Turkey had no access to the platform, the EBA seems to be no alternative to the traditional education at the moment. The results of a recent survey conducted by Eğitim Sen confirms that Turkey is not ready yet to learn online. 93,8 % of the respondents stated that distance education is not done in a qualified way and 62,5 % stated that the distance education should remain as an exception only for the pandemic period [15].

The issue of digital divide has to be tackled comprehensively in order to close the gap in education among the students with diverse economic and social backgrounds. Continuing education with the EBA in its current form can irreversibly harm the human capital in Turkey and lead to the emergence of a “lost generation” in terms of education.

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