

## Pre-Service Primary Teachers' Opinions about the Course of Practice Teaching through Distance Education

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**Abstract.** Due to the coronavirus pandemic affecting the world, face-to-face higher education practices were suspended in most countries, and teaching processes continued with distance education methods. This method has prevented university students from taking theoretical and practical courses face-to-face. In this regard, the teaching practice course, which is the fundamental course for professional preparation in education faculties, was conducted at a distance, in which its effectiveness becomes questionable. Hence, this research aims at determining the prospective classroom teachers' views about the process of conducting the teaching practice course at a distance. This research employs case study design by involving 37 pre-service primary teachers attending the education faculty of a state university. In addition, the data collection were done using a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers, which was then analyzed using content analysis. The results conclusion showed that the pre-service teachers expressed opinions about the theoretical and practical dimensions, expectations, level of content, and suggestions for the development of the course.

**Keywords:** distance education, teaching practice, internship, pandemic, Coronavirus

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**INTRODUCTION** ~ Coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan, China on 1 December 2019 and then affected the whole world, has become a global pandemic declared by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020) on March 11, 2020, and the pandemic has caused changes in all aspects of human life. Education systems had to suspend face-to-face meetings to prevent bigger problems. Due to the pandemic, many countries, including Turkey, have suspended face-to-face training (Can, 2020). With the closure of educational institutions, the distance education process started and students and teachers tried to ensure the education continuity with the help of information technologies (Bayındır, 2021). With this transition, university students started to take both theoretical and practical courses online. One of the practical courses is the teaching practice course taken by pre-service teachers (Koç, 2020). The theoretical and practical dimensions of the teaching practice classes were carried out with distance education and pre-service teachers were not physically present in a practice class during this process. Pre-service teachers who are both participants and practitioners of teaching activities have become important stakeholders within the teaching practice course they are responsible for during the pandemic period (Altan, 2021).

The global epidemic prevented this important course making significant contributions to the professional development of prospective teachers. The pre-service teachers carried out the theoretical parts of the course with distance education methods under the supervision of faculty members and the practical parts by instructors through distance education. However, this situation also brought about some problems because the instructors themselves experienced problems with distance education in this process (Avcı & Akdeniz, 2021; Bergdahl & Nouri, 2021; Demir & Özdaş, 2020; Hibszer & Tracz, 2021; Kavuk & Demirtaş, 2021). The fact that pre-service teachers were involved in this process without any teaching experience indicates that they could not experience an actual classroom atmosphere. In addition, their distance lessons raised questions about whether they had acquired the competencies expected to be gained in this process or not. It is stated that practice teachers have an important function in ensuring their professional development, as pre-service teachers stay together for a long time in the school environment and are in direct interaction with them (Hsu, 2005). However, pre-service teachers could not come together with their mentor teachers in this process, which continued with distance education during the pandemic. Therefore, they could not benefit from their experiences sufficiently.

The research conducted by Özdaş & Çakmak (2018) determined pre-service teachers' metaphorical perceptions of the teaching practice course. The pre-service teachers see this course positively as they believe that it will contribute to their professional development. However, conducting this course with distance education becomes questionable whether it can provide the necessary experience and observation opportunities or not. In this respect, the problem statement of the research was determined to be "What are the opinions of pre-service teachers about the teaching practice course conducted at a distance?". Thus, this study aims at determining the views of prospective classroom teachers about the process of conducting the teaching practice course at a distance.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The teaching practice is one of the most important courses in teacher training programs (Yök, 1998) Teaching practice provides pre-service teacher with teaching skills in the classroom and at the teaching level; in which enabling them to teach lessons in a planned way, as a course where the implementation are discussed and evaluated (MEB Mevzuat, 1998). The teaching practice course aims at equipping pre-service teachers with knowledge and skills, such as determining the work to be done, making the lesson plan, conducting the teaching, measuring and evaluating in the practice school. In this connection, pre-service teachers are expected to acquire the basic knowledge of the teaching profession and the skills necessary in this context, based on practice (Kangalgil & Özgül, 2019). This course includes the activities of observing, designing, applying and evaluating teaching. It allows pre-service teachers to develop their pedagogical content knowledge and reflect it to the classroom environment.

This course serves as an important bridge for pre-service teachers to establish a balance between theory and practice (Giebelhaus & Bowman, 2002).

The teaching practice course is one of the most important courses for pre-service teachers to develop their professional competencies in the classroom environment. It provides an opportunity for the pre-service teachers to try and develop the knowledge and skills gained during their undergraduate education in a real school environment, includes important practices in which the pre-service teacher demonstrates their teaching performance in their field (Bayındır, 2021). They have the opportunity to increase their knowledge and competencies under the supervision of faculty members and under the mentorship of teachers. In teacher education, teaching practice provides an opportunity for social interaction and participation in the school context (Walshaw, 2004). In this context, it can be said that this course is of great importance for their professional life. The pre-service teacher generally replace the school teachers and teaching processes to develop their discourse and practices about what it means to be a teacher (Murray et al., 2018). Hence, teaching practice makes significant contributions to the process.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Model**

This research employs case study design, which is an approach in which the existing situation in a certain time period is examined in depth with qualitative data collection tools (Creswell, 2007). In this research, opinions about the teaching practice course realized with the distance education process were determined.

### **Research Group**

The research was conducted on pre-service primary teachers attending the education faculty of a state university. A total of 37 pre-service primary teachers taking the teaching practice course at a distance during the pandemic participated in the current research. Of the participants, 25 (67.6%) are females, and 12 (32.4%) are males. The pre-service primary teachers, who participated in the research, delivered an online lesson at least once within the context of the teaching practice course.

### **Data Collection Tools**

Interview was used as a research instrument, in which a literature review was conducted to determine the questions included in the interview in line with the research aim and related studies. After the questions were prepared, they were submitted to be reviewed by two faculty members working in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. After given feedbacks, the wording of some questions was changed so the interview was made ready for piloting. There were seven open-ended questions in the final interview form. The questions were responded by the pre-service primary teachers in the research group in writing.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was done using content analysis approach. For this purpose, a transcript was made from the qualitative data obtained. The researchers did coding. Then, a consensus was reached by calculating the percentage of agreement. After the coding process, the themes were determined. Lastly, excerpts from the answers of the participants were also included in the research findings, and for this, the participants were coded as P1, P2, P3 .... P37.

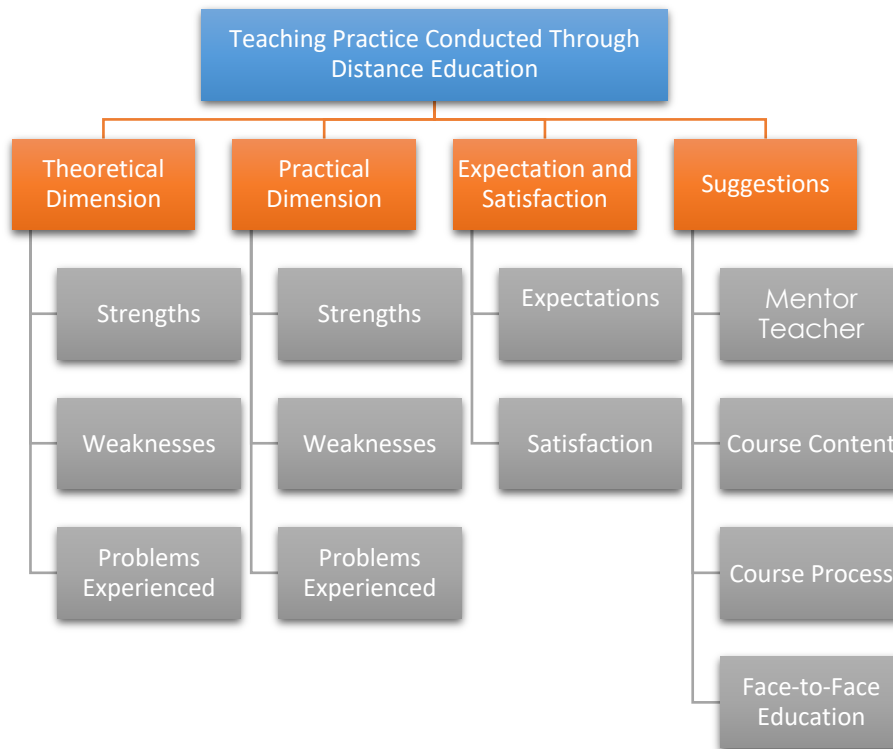
### **Validity and Reliability Studies**

The methods used in qualitative research were adopted to establish validity and reliability in the current research. In this context, credibility and transferability criteria were taken as basis to determine research validity. In order to ensure credibility, the collected data were reported in detailed and some excerpts from the participants were included. For transferability purpose, the data collection process, participant selection criteria, and data analysis were described in detail.

Dependability and confirmability criteria were taken as the basis for determining reliability. The researchers coded opinions and calculated the percentages of the agreement. The calculated result of the agreement percentage was determined to be 91.2%, which was accepted as reliable since it was above the 70% (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). For verifiability, the data set was coded, and a percentage of the agreement of 92% was calculated. Thus, the research reliability was established.

### **FINDINGS**

Based on the analysis from the data obtained, the themes, sub-themes, and codes based on teaching practice with distance education were developed and presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Teaching Practice Conducted through Distance Education

As indicated in Figure 1 above, the themes of teaching practice through distance education are divided into four sub-themes: theoretical dimension, practical dimension, expectations, and suggestions. Below are given explanations about these sub-themes.

### **Theoretical Dimension**

The pre-service teachers expressed their opinions on the theoretical dimension of the teaching practice process that took place through distance education. The pre-service teachers mentioned the strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical dimension of the process and the problems experienced in this process. The codes regarding the opinions of the pre-service teachers about the theoretical dimension are explained below.

#### **Strengths**

Some participants stated that the teaching practice process through distance education was productive and that they had the opportunity to come together to discuss and gain information under the guidance of the instructor, even though they were in different places. One of the pre-service teachers explained his/her opinions in this regard as follows; *"I think that the theoretical lessons are productive and good with the opportunity to meet in a common area anytime, anywhere."* (P18). Another pre-service teacher said, *"I found the theoretical training I received sufficient and useful in every aspect."* (P2).

### **Weaknesses**

The pre-service teachers stated in general that the teaching practice process, which was generally carried out with distance education, was inefficient compared to face-to-face education, due to technical problems, low interaction, and insufficient time. *"I think it is more inefficient than face-to-face education"* (P13). Another pre-service teacher said, *"I was excited to receive this course using technology. But I still think that the classroom environment is better because there are factors such as eye contact. There is no interaction in this process and I think this is the most important shortcoming."* (P19).

### **Problems Experienced**

The pre-service teachers stated that they experienced problems, such as internet connection, limited learning, lack of concentration and lack of technological devices during the teaching practice carried out with distance education. One of the pre-service teachers referred to the technical problems experienced in this process, *"Internet disconnections, computer and telephone problems were the problems hindering our education."* (P27). Another pre-service teacher stated that he/she had a concentration problem in this process carried out with distance education; *"As there was no real classroom environment, I experienced the problem of concentration."* (P11).

### **Practical Dimension**

The pre-service teachers expressed their opinion about the practical dimension of the teaching practice process that took place through distance education. They mentioned the strengths and weaknesses of the practical dimension of the process and the problems experienced in this process. The codes regarding the opinions of the pre-service teachers about the practical dimension are explained below.

### **Strengths**

Some participants stated that the practical dimension of the teaching practice process carried out through distance education provided them with experience in the use of technology and delivery of lessons, and classroom management was sufficient in the pandemic conditions and saved time. A pre-service teacher explained that he/she gained techno-pedagogical experience as follows; *"The practical dimension was very productive. I discovered many web 2.0 tools. I learned what to pay attention to when teaching at a distance."* (P25). Another pre-service teacher explained that he/she gained experience on classroom management as follows; *"I think that the practical dimension was strong because we learned how to manage the classroom and how we can cope even under difficult conditions."* (P27).

### **Weaknesses**

The pre-service teachers mentioned the weaknesses of the practical dimension of the teaching practice process, which was generally carried out with distance education, such as technical problems, inability to experience face-to-face education, inability to communicate with students, limited activities, and the ineffectiveness of the activities. One of the pre-service teachers explained how he/she could not experience face-to-face education as follows; *"There is a great shortcoming in terms of practice. We do not know what difficulties we will encounter in face-to-face education in the future. We have not experienced this. I think that's his biggest weakness."* (P32). Another pre-service teacher explained the weakness of not being able to communicate with students as follows; *"... because the teaching was one-sided, there was lack of meaningful learning. The pre-service teachers could not know exactly what they were giving to students, and they could not receive feedback from students; thus, there was always something missing."* (P15).

### **Problems Experienced**

Pre-service teachers mentioned problems such as technical problems, lack of interaction, classroom management, the mentor teacher's lack of experience, difficulty in activating students, inability to get to know students, and quality of teaching. A pre-service teacher explained his/her experiences in the process as follows; *"The main problem is that it is distant. While we could not reach students in the actual sense of the term, we could not benefit from the experiences of the class teachers because they were also inexperienced on this platform. The lesson progressed one-dimensionally as if someone was talking to a community rather than teaching."* (P29). Similarly, another pre-service teacher said, *"I had problems such as not being able to implement activities, not being able to teach efficiently, not interacting much with students because it was at a distance."* (P8).

### **Expectation and Satisfaction**

The pre-service teachers expressed their opinions on their expectations regarding the teaching practice process carried out through distance education and whether these expectations were fulfilled at the end of the process. The codes regarding the opinions of the pre-service teachers about expectations and satisfaction are explained below.

### **Expectations**

Before the process begins, participants stated that they had expectations such as gaining knowledge, skills and experience within the scope of the teaching practice course, feeling to be like a teacher, learning about classroom and time management and being able to teach students something. A pre-service teacher explained his/her expectations as follows; *"To be able to obtain useful experiences in minimizing the problems I will experience in practice when*

*I start my profession.*" (P7). Another pre-service teacher said, *"It was to be able to manage the class and time and to maximize the productive time of the lesson."* (P22).

### **Satisfaction**

The pre-service teachers expressed their opinions about fulfilling their expectations regarding this course. In this context, the pre-service teachers stated that their expectations were not fully met because it was a process carried out through distance education, but it was also a process that contributed to them in terms of distance education. One pre-service teacher explained that the process did not fulfill their expectations but they gained some experience on distance education as follows; *"Although my expectations were not met at many points due to distance education, it enabled us to be more knowledgeable about distance education."* (P11). Another pre-service teacher stated that this process was insufficient in terms of preparing them for face-to-face education; *"It prepared us for a distance education process that will be experienced in the future, but did not contribute much to our preparation for face-to-face education."* (P36).

### **Suggestions**

The pre-service teachers made suggestions regarding the teaching practice process through distance education. In this case, the pre-service teachers expressed their opinions on the mentor teacher, course content, course duration and face-to-face education. The codes regarding the opinions of the pre-service teachers about the suggestions are explained below.

### **Mentor Teacher**

The pre-service teachers offered suggestions such as the mentor teacher giving them more feedback, having different mentor teachers, more active mentor teachers, and the development of the mentor teacher's competencies in the process of teaching practice carried out through distance education. A pre-service teacher said, *"Our mentor teachers could have given us more feedback on the course. So we could handle the next lesson accordingly."* (P22). Another pre-service teacher suggested that mentor teachers should develop their competencies in the fields of distance education and technologies as follows; *"I can suggest that teachers should receive in-service training on this subject because this training can help them learn more about technology and thus teachers can be made aware of this issue."* (P3).

### **Course Content**

The pre-service teachers made suggestions regarding the content of the teaching practice course carried out through distance education. The pre-service teachers stated that this course should be designed in a way to include practice-oriented activities, classroom management skills, and Web 2.0 tools. A pre-service teacher suggested that the content should be more practice-oriented as follows; *"More activities can be done. This course should be more*



*practice-oriented and activity-oriented.*" (P17). Another pre-service teacher emphasized that classroom management skills should be included in the theoretical part of the course by stating that *"I think the theoretical part should be more focused on practice, classroom and time management."* (P11).

### **Course Duration**

The pre-service teachers made suggestions regarding the duration of this course through distance education. The pre-service teachers suggested that this course should be expanded across more than one term, that the practice should be more than one day and that the course hours should be increased. One of the pre-service teachers stated that more time should be allocated to the practical dimension of the course; *"The number of lessons taught can be increased. Classes can be attended two days a week instead of one."* (P33). Another pre-service teacher suggested that this course should be started earlier in the undergraduate education; *"I recommend starting this course from the 2<sup>nd</sup> year."* (P14)

### **Face-to-Face Education**

The pre-service teachers made suggestions regarding the teaching of the course through face-to-face education. In this context, a few pre-service teachers thought that certain parts of this course should be given face-to-face, and some of them thought that they should be completely given face-to-face. A pre-service teacher emphasized that the practical part of the course should be face-to-face as follows; *"At least a certain part of the teaching practice course should be face-to-face. Theoretical parts can be delivered at a distance while the practical parts can be given face-to-face."* (P1). Another pre-service teacher stated that *"this kind of practical course should be given face-to-face."* (P19).

## **DISCUSSION**

In this research, the participants' opinions were obtained to determine their views of primary school teacher candidates about the teaching practice course conducted through distance education. The research results were reached by analyzing this data. In this case, it was determined that the pre-service primary teachers expressed their opinions on the theoretical and practical dimensions of the teaching practice course through distance education, expressed their expectations from the process and satisfaction and made suggestions about the process.

The pre-service primary teachers gave their opinions on the theoretical dimension of the teaching practice course with distance education within three themes: strengths, weaknesses, and problems experienced. In this process, pre-service teachers expressed positive opinions about being able to continue their education even in different places through distance education, which indicated that pre-service teachers had a positive view of the process that continues with distance education as an alternative to face-to-face education, which was

interrupted due to the pandemic. The research conducted by Gök Çolak & Efeoğlu (2021) concluded that the prospective teachers were satisfied with the delivery of the theoretical part of the teaching practice course through distance education. Distance education is not dependent on time and place and has a more flexible structure than traditional education in many ways (Riedling, 2020). The result obtained in the current research is due to this flexibility offered by distance education rather than complete satisfaction because the pre-service teachers had negative opinions about the theoretical part of the process with distance education. These negative opinions were evaluated as the weaknesses of the process. Most of the pre-service primary teachers stated that this process was inefficient due to low interaction, technical problems and insufficient time. These opinions show that the pre-service teachers were not very satisfied with the theoretical dimension of the teaching practice course carried out through distance education. This is because of the problems experienced by the pre-service teachers during the process. The pre-service teachers stated that they experienced problems related to the internet connection, limited learning, concentration, and lack of technological devices in the process. It is stated that the lack of internet access and technological devices is a common problem that pre-service teachers have to deal with (Flores & Gago, 2020). These problems are thought to have caused the pre-service teachers to find distance education more ineffective and inefficient than face-to-face education.

The pre-service primary teachers gave their opinions on the practical dimension of the teaching practice course with distance education within three themes: strengths, weaknesses, and problems experienced. The pre-service teachers stated that the teaching practice assisted by the use of technology provided them with the experience in teaching lessons and classroom management, saved time, and was sufficient considering the pandemic conditions. In other words, the pre-service teachers considered being able to engage in teaching practice during the pandemic and learning about the use of technology in distance teaching as the strengths of the process. Distance education is considered important and useful in this period in terms of creating an alternative classroom environment that allows students to continue their education at a time when everyone has to stay at home for health reasons (Şeren et al., 2020). Moreover, since distance education increases the use of technology, it has also enabled the development of technology skills of educators. De Paepe et al. (2018) state the advantageous aspects of distance education as the use of technology and the improvement of skills in the use of technology, and raising awareness of the importance of technology in education. In this regard, the distance education experiences gained by the pre-service primary teachers in this process contributed to the development of their technological awareness and competencies. Most of the pre-service teachers stated that in the practical dimension of the teaching practice course with distance education, they found some problems such as technical problems, lack of experience in face-to-face teaching, lack of interaction with students, limited activities, and

inefficient process in general. Pre-service teachers feel the deficiencies of not being in an actual classroom environment during this period when they will develop their professional competencies and reflect on their knowledge and skills in the classroom environment. This situation can be defined as an obstacle for pre-service teachers to prepare for the profession before starting their professional careers. In fact, it is possible to say that they were faced with a situation that hindered the development of their professional competencies (Gök Çolak & Efeoğlu, 2021). Conversely, while the pre-service teachers received education directed to face-to-face education, they had to demonstrate these competencies in the distance education environment. Considering the lack of experience of pre-service teachers in distance education environments, where even teachers are caught unprepared, it is expected that they cannot get efficiency from the teaching practice course carried out through distance education. Pre-service teachers will inevitably experience some problems in this process. The pre-service teachers stated that they experienced problems within the teaching practice course, such as technical problems, lack of interaction, classroom management, mentor teacher's lack of experience, difficulty in activating students, inability to get to know students, and quality of teaching. The research conducted by Aslan Altan (2021) observed that pre-service teachers experienced technical problems and classroom management problems in the online teaching practice process. Güven & Uçar (2021) concluded that the prospective teachers thought that in the teaching practice course carried out through distance education, it is not possible to be in the same environment as students and thus to experience students' behaviors and attitudes, and as a result it is not possible to teach theoretical conclusions. In this context, the conducting especially the practical part of the teaching practice course through distance education causes important deficiencies rather than a positive experience for pre-service teachers.

The pre-service teachers emphasized that they had expectations such as gaining knowledge, skills, and experience within the scope of the teaching practice course, feeling like a teacher, learning about classroom and time management, and being able to teach students something. However, at the end of the process, they stated that most of these expectations were not fully met because it was a process that took place with distance education. The teaching practice course will contribute to the cognitive and affective development of pre-service teachers. Akhan & Kaymak (2021) determined that pre-service teachers' teaching motivation and teaching self-efficacy increased at the end of the teaching practice course. In this respect, the teaching practice course is important in gaining both the necessary knowledge and skills, and affective behaviors related to the teaching profession. In this process, which took place with distance education, the affective losses of pre-service teachers are higher, indicating that the lack of the pre-service teachers' interaction with the mentor

teacher, faculty member, students, school, and class may cause cognitive and affective losses related to the teaching profession.

The pre-service teachers offered suggestions such as the mentor teacher giving them more feedback, having different mentor teachers, more active mentor teachers, and the development of the mentor teacher's competencies in the process of teaching practice through distance education. During the teaching practice process, the mentor teacher undertakes the task of mentoring for pre-service teachers. The mentor teacher is a criticizing colleague who enables the pre-service teacher to reach meaningful thoughts while practicing (Schön, 1987). On the other hand, Braund (2001) defines the mentor teacher as a reflective practitioner and emphasizes that he/she is the person who, together with the pre-service teacher, deals with pedagogical problems and the way of adapting them to later teaching situations in order to improve students' learning. Hopper (2001) defines that as an equal partner working with the pre-service teacher, the mentor teachers do not only observe the pre-service teacher's delivery of lessons. In this case, those who effectively mentor pre-service teachers make significant contributions to their professional development. The healthy execution of practices in schools depends on the coordinated work of the implementation parties and their fulfilment of their responsibilities (Altıntaş & Görgeç, 2014). However, due to the lack of interaction in distance education, the mentor teacher only exists as an observer in the process. When the opinions and suggestions of the pre-service primary teachers are considered, the necessary communication and interaction with the mentor teacher could not be accomplished during the teaching practice course through distance education.

The pre-service teachers emphasized that this course should be designed to include practice-oriented activities, classroom management skills, and Web 2.0 tools. The pre-service teachers suggested that this course should be expanded across more than one term in which the practice should be more than one day, and the course hours should be increased. These opinions reflected the pre-service teachers' problems. Güven & Uçar (2021) suggest that the content of practical courses, especially given through distance education, should be planned in such a way as to be more practical and to make students more active. Especially since the pre-service teachers could not get efficiency during the process of distance education in this course, they suggested updating the content of the course in a practice-oriented manner. Similarly, the pre-service teachers emphasized that the time allocated to this course should be increased, as they saw this process as insufficient.

The pre-service primary teachers suggested that this course should be given face-to-face. In addition, some pre-service teachers stated that, in particular, the practical parts of the course should be face-to-face. None of the pre-service teachers suggested that this course be given entirely through distance education. The pre-service teachers stated that this course be given

face-to-face due to the problems experienced during the process, not getting enough efficiency and not meeting their expectations. The teaching practice course is one of the practical courses in the program. This course is complex to deliver through distance education due to the use of mental and physical skills (Yurdakal & Susar Kirmizi, 2021). Thus, the pre-service teachers recommended face-to-face education due to impossibilities such as not being able to have a real classroom experience and to benefit from the experience of the mentor teacher because the teaching profession is a profession that includes both theory and practice (Bayindir, 2021) and this course provides an important pre-professional experience for pre-service teachers. As a result, distance education, which is compulsory due to the pandemic, has a negative effect on the teaching practice course, which will affect pre-service teachers in their professional lives.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research results determined that the primary school teacher candidates had positive and negative opinions about the theoretical and practical dimensions of the distance teaching practice course. It concluded that pre-service teachers had positive views on the continuation of the process even with distance education during the pandemic period, but they could not get much efficiency from conducting this process with distance education. In this process, there were problems, such as lack of experience, technical problems, and lack of communication. The expectations of the teacher candidates towards this course could not be fully fulfilled initially due to the realization of distance education. At the same time, in line with the opinions of the pre-service teachers, the teaching practice course should be carried out actively and the practice dimension should be face-to-face.

This research suggests the following recommendation. First, it should be prepared for situations where a distance education process will be mandatory, especially in terms of practical courses and infrastructure and program studies can be carried out by the concerned persons/authorities. Second, the content and structure of the teaching practice course can be prepared according to all forms of education, such as face-to-face education, distance education and hybrid education. In addition, pre-service teachers can be graduated as teachers who are ready for these situations. Third, training can be organized for mentor teachers and instructors on how to teach teaching practice courses effectively through distance education. Fourth, in the process of teaching practice that will take place through distance education, the practical dimension is face-to-face as much as possible. If there is no such opportunity, pre-service teachers can be provided with practical experience through micro-teaching, simulation, virtual reality or different techniques. Fifth, internship opportunities may be offered to pre-service teachers who are included in teaching practice with distance education so that they can gain experience in face-to-face education before or after their appointment to the profession.

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