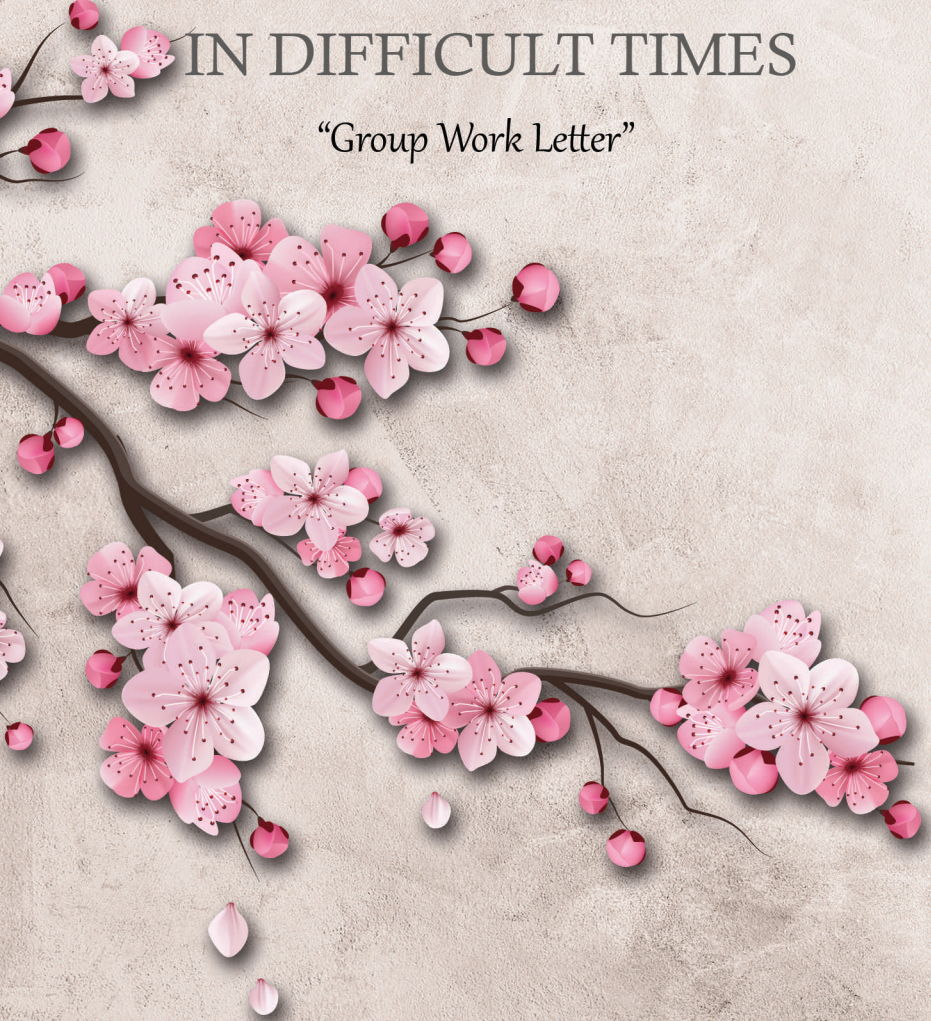


# BEING A TEACHER

IN DIFFICULT TIMES

“Group Work Letter”



Clinical Psychologist  
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NARRATIVE  Terapi  
Türkiye Topluluğu



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*This document is the outcome of the group work sessions which took place on 1st, 4th, 8th and 11th December 2020, with the participation of ten teachers working for the Üsküdar District Directorate of National Education*

## **GROUP WORK LEADERS**

Dr. Mehmet DİNÇ  
Clinical Psychologist Gülcenur DİNÇER

## **TEACHERS TOOK PART IN A GROUP WORK**

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Esra KOÇ  
Nazan BULUR  
Hüsna AŞUT  
Sabahat ÖZGÖL

# THE STORY OF THIS WORK

Mehmet DİNÇ\*



## BEING " A TEACHER" IN DIFFICULT TIMES

On October 6, 2020, I started the day with the message of our Üsküdar National Education Director Mr. Sinan Aydın. A teacher working in Üsküdar had sent a message to Mr. Aydın about her experiences during the pandemic period. Mr. Aydın sent the teacher's message to me and asked what we could do to help teachers who found themselves in a similar situation. The message read as follows:

*\*Clinical Psychologist, Hasan Kalyoncu University, PhD*



*"I do not know how much my friends agree with me, but I think I had burnout syndrome during the pandemic period. I was almost excluded from teaching, which is a profession that is always considered sacred and valued in society, which I do willingly and without realising it, in all stages of my life. I feel like a criminal, like a thief. We were placed in a position that felt like being a free rider. Frankly, we did not feel that anybody in society took care of us in this regard. However, the pandemic period, that is, being away from school, was not a situation we created or chose. Most of us have experienced, and still have, the difficulties of distance education, which requires much more effort and involvement than face-to-face training, but this is not seen by people. We constantly feel the accusations and hatred of people .... I started thinking seriously about what other jobs I could do. I think it would be useful if there was some training to support us in dealing with this feeling of worthlessness and humiliation, at least for myself. I hope I did manage to explain it correctly."*

## We Couldn't Sit Doing Nothing

In fact, this was the case for teachers not only in Üsküdar but all over Turkey and even in many countries around the world. The pandemic caused similar difficulties and hardship in many places. It is impossible to conduct a study to cover all teachers of the world, Turkey, or even Üsküdar. However, at the same time, it was not possible to just idly stand by.



I told Mr. Aydın that we could form a group work with our volunteer teachers. I also offered to my colleague, Clinical Psychologist Gülcenur Dinçer who is very experienced in group work, to carry out this study together. Both Mr. Sinan Aydın and Gülcenur accepted my proposal for group work. An announcement was made for the teachers working in Üsküdar. Over a hundred teachers applied for ten positions within the group work. Due to the huge number of applications, selection was carried out by taking into consideration the various age groups and subjects taught by the applicant teachers. Then we came together with our teachers who participated in the group work on December 1, 4, 8, and 11, 2020



## Our Primary Objectives in **Our Group Work**

- ▶ To narrate the alternative stories of teachers in their lives during the pandemic,
- ▶ To ensure that the problems they faced as teachers during the epidemic and the knowledge and skills they have used in this process are captured,
- ▶ To reveal the skills and technique teachers successfully used to cope with the difficulties of this period, and to share them with other teachers (Denborough, 2018).



## What Did We Do With **Our Teachers?**

- 1 In the first session, under the title of "Our Stories and Our Teaching", the participants introduced themselves, told stories about teaching and the meaning of teaching for them.
- 2 In the second session, they shared what they experienced during this period under the title of "Being a Teacher during an Epidemic" and the effects of the process both personally and professionally.
- 3 In the third session, they talked about what knowledge, skills, relationships and beliefs they used to support them overcome their personal and professional difficulties in this period, under the heading "What We Experienced and What We Achieved so far".
- 4 In the fourth session, they evaluated the collective document prepared under the title of "What We Want to Share" to reflect the work done over the three weeks.



## How was the Operation of the Study?

Each session lasted ninety minutes. In the group work, special care was taken to create a suitable environment for teachers to tell about their experiences and the aspects which are important to them, without the implication of a "correct answer"(Lokken, 2011).

As the leaders of the group, we positioned ourselves not as experts who know the reality of of being a teacher, but as co-researchers in a study that enables them to reveal their knowledge, skills, and experiences (Epston, 1999).

In the group work, we prepared a collective document <sup>(1)</sup> in order to "save the word from being spoken" and present it to the benefit of both themselves and other people who share similar experiences (Denborough, 2008). According to the Narrative Therapy approach, which we used to design the work activities, "what is written does not disappear as easily as what is spoken, they resist time and space, they witness those who are in therapy and immortalise them" (Epston, 1984).

After four sessions, we organised a descriptive ceremony in which we shared the collective document we prepared and our Director of National Education, Mr. Aydın, gave a speech of thanks to a group formed by the invitations of a colleague of the teachers who participated in the group study (Myerhoff, 1986 as cited in Denborough, 2018).

## We Faced Difficulties Due To The Conditions **But It Was Worth It**

The study had been planned to be carried out face-to-face. However, before the start of the study, as a result of increasing cases of infections, face-to-face education in schools was interrupted and we conducted the study online. Although this is not something we planned, it was in line with the spirit of the period. At the beginning of the study, my father and mother tested positive for Coronavirus; in the middle of the study, my wife and son also tested positive. In fact, the night before the first session of the study, my daughter had a high fever. In addition to these difficulties that I have experienced, our participants also joined this work group while encountering serious difficulties and making sacrifices.





## We Pursued Hope In This Work

"Because what happens today is less difficult thanks to hoping. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear the challenges of today" (Hahn, 2010).

In this work, we believed that "in addition to every story of hardship and adversity, we can discover our connections with other people, our desires, our hopes, our dreams for a better life, our skills for living and survival, and above all, our values that we hold above" (Yuen, 2019).

# THANKS



On this occasion, I would like to express my gratitude to our teacher who sent the message that led to the study and to our Üsküdar Director of National Education, Sinan Aydın, who took an action immediately by paying attention to this message, and to the Clinical Psychologist Gülcenur Dinçer who led the group work and to all the teachers who participated in this study. We would be very happy if you read this study and shared your thoughts and feelings with us, or your own thoughts and feelings about similar situations expressed in this study.

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BEING  
**A TEACHER**  
IN DIFFICULT TIMES



"GROUP WORK LETTER"

# Hello!

We are ten teachers working  
in Istanbul-Üsküdar



Some of us work in kindergarten, some in middle school, some in high school. Some of us have been teaching for over twenty years and some of us are still in their early years in their profession. For us, teaching is the place where we truly want to be, we feel in school is where we are realising our aspiration. Being with children and young people keeps us alive. Some of us believe that their characters and their zodiac signs have led them to teach. Some of us went back to university again and waited sixteen years to become a teacher, others started teaching only to leave and to come back again.

# How do we define ourselves?

We define ourselves as patient, compassionate, contributing to people's lives, finding hope in all circumstances, constantly trying to improve ourselves to the point that we listen to audiobooks even while ironing, we are hungry for learning, aware of everything, and eager to convey what we learned to young people; we remain strong when times are difficult.



# What do we want?

We came together four times to talk about some of the things we could not overcome during the pandemic, our increasing anxieties, our test with inhumanity, the deprivation of our school where we fulfilled our ambitions, and our personal difficulties from the past to the present, to discuss our current situation. We named our group "Difficult Times". We want to apply what we learned from each other to our lives. Since teaching becomes our trait when we learn, we also want to convey what we have learned to our children, students, and friends. We want our voices to be heard, we want others to pay attention to their tone and style when talking to teachers, to know that we are humans too, not robots; we want to prevent being mentally worn down. If our mental state is not good, we cannot be beneficial to children.





## What did we do during **The pandemic?**



Staying at home during the pandemic has been good for some of us, as it gave us the opportunity to spend more time with our families. Some of us got to know each other better because they had never been so close for so long with their family. There have been those of us who felt that time was flowing more slowly and some of us who spent more time walking rather than using public transportation. Some of us used this period to work on their professional development, attending courses, and training sessions. However, for some of us, this period has come with a feeling of a crushing weight from the pandemic on their mind and body. Some of us felt lonely at home as they missed their social environment at school. To them, staying at home was like torture, like a prison. We also experienced the feeling of being useless. Some of us felt extremely restrained.

## This period is like **an inflated sadness**

We can say that this period is a very difficult process for us. There are those of us who experienced difficulties such as losing our spouse and relatives, or witnessing the serious health problems of parents and friends. Some of us think that this is the period when their private lives reflect most on education. This is a period when some of us feel stronger about being a parent or a child.





## We have responsibilities **besides teaching**

In addition to the responsibilities we carry out as teachers, we live in a period in which the responsibilities we carry out as parents and children increase. Especially those who are away from their families find it more difficult. Stay or leave, become infected if you do not, and unable to care for them if you do not, with the fear of losing our loved ones on top of it all.

## We had **more empathy**

Some of us had difficulties attending online classes with our children. They had difficulties in their relationship with their children. In order to cope, they tried to feel like their children, to think like them. They looked for the people who have the same difficulties with their children; they called them, out of the blue. They reached out to people at the same school with their children on social media and saw that everyone went through similar processes but nobody was able to express it in words. This led them to think that it was not a problem. Some of us feel that our regularity is disrupted, leading to problems such as not being able to sleep or eating disorders. Some of us find it difficult to get over our fears.





## We kept ourselves busy, **discovered ourselves**

Some of us kept themselves busy by dealing with the difficulties we faced during this period. Especially since they suddenly had a lot of time on their hands, they devoted time to their hobbies, which they had not been able to follow beforehand. Some of us have managed to do things they wanted to do for a long time. While doing this, they started to take lessons without calculating money as they did before. In the process, they realised that what they had wanted to do before, they now no longer wanted to do. Understanding this also helped them get to know themselves. They noticed that they had magnified the enthusiasm they could not reach. Then they overcame their shyness about the jobs they wanted and loved.

## We were worried about **other people's worries**

Some of us benefited from not following the news. Some of us told our close friends what they have learned. For some of us, it was good to slow down. They benefited from taking notice of beautiful things, dropping the urge to catch up with everything. It made them feel good to help family members. They realised that when you see someone needing more help than you do, you don't worry too much about your own needs. Worrying about someone else's problems makes you stronger and your own problems are easily overcome.



## We remained strong **with our family**



Some of us have stayed strong by sitting at the table for a long time with family members. It is good to remind each other of the difficulty of the period when they argue, and to share examples of how they coped. They think that some fresh air and appreciation with a little hope solved the problems.



Some of us have improved their teaching and have tried to learn enjoyable things. Some of us have watched the movies they have noted but not seen before. Some of us have spent more time with our children than ever before. Some of us have deliberately isolated ourselves completely, spent time around our family, home, and ourselves, and have kind of travel to the past.

## We invested in **our professional development**

Some of us have increased their technology-related knowledge and skills in order to be able to teach by distance education better and more effectively. Some of us who grew up in a time when computers didn't enter the homes have overcome their fears about computers and learned new and different things. We have also been involved in new projects. Some of us have discovered new things about themselves. While they always thought that it would be good to be outside and meet and chat with someone, they saw that it was good to lock themselves in at home during this period.

## You don't need to go out to be useful

They have experienced that it is not necessary to be outside to be useful to people, that it is possible to be useful at home, and that you do not have to go somewhere to learn something. They experienced the power and pleasure of being able to do something at home, too. They have learned to make toys for their children and neighbours. They spent hours braiding their nephew's hair. There have been some of us who grew flowers that had withered because they had not been looked after, and some of us rediscovered skills they thought they had lost. Some of us tried things that they previously thought were too difficult to do.

## We turned our balconies into cafes for our children

Some of us felt empowered by the people who shared their pain during this period. Some of us have found solace in movies and peace in books. Some of us followed video channels and read about past epidemics. The fact that they were not sick during this period made them think they did not have a big problem. Some of us turned their balconies into cafes for their children. They reduced their space and felt happy. Some of us went back to the old days when they were closer to their mother and removed years of distance from family members. Some of us found the bracelet that mother bought when they were thirteen and started wearing it again.



## We didn't know **how beautiful it is**



Many of us spent more time in nature. There were some who went to the groves to relax, touched the trees with open palms, walked on the ground barefoot, looked at the sky more often and longer, some who watched the waves of the sea and the leaves of the trees, some who saw a rainbow much larger than any rainbow seen before. There were even some who followed crows with their children every day and shot a documentary on crows, others examined the colours and patterns on cats. It reminded us of the poet who said that "I didn't know how beautiful it is", as if we had forgotten that nature was so beautiful.

## Sleep also became a method

Some of us slept more to overcome the problems of this period. Anxiety grew so big that sleep was used as a coping mechanism. Dreams of distant family and places so far we couldn't visit became a soothing balm for our souls.

Without doing all these things, we think we may get through this period in a healthy way, we will be more unhappy which will reflect on others.



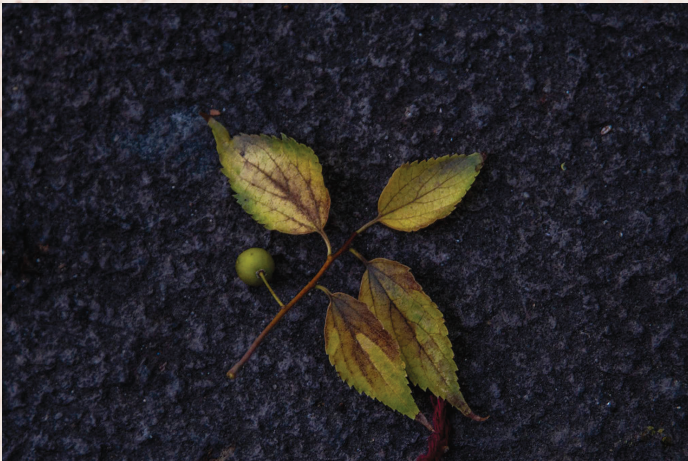
## We have thoughts that **we take strength**

Life goes on no matter what, and humans adapt no matter what the situation is. Whatever your troubles, your remedy is not far away, there is no need to be afraid. We have faced great difficulties before, there is no regret, just devoting ourselves to new skills and learning. After the difficulties, routine sets in and life goes on. Each emotion passes after a while and is replaced by others. As we say, "a dark day cannot keep getting darker". We therefore think that this one will pass too. We have an owner. It is good for us to think that our Lord Allah is with us, even though we find ourselves in a very difficult situation. What will be will be and we do not worry once we have done our best. Faith and hope to keep people alive.



## We learned to have faith from our parents

We think we learned these thoughts from our fathers and mothers. We believe they stimulate our thoughts. One of us observed how his father, having lived through very difficult times in the past, was coping with the situation; this gave him belief and made him feel stronger. One of us still carries the light of his mother's childhood love and finds support in it. The journeys to our personal past show that we learn something from wherever we go, they make us think that the pandemic journey will teach us something and that the future will be bright. One of us states that even though his father went through dialysis three days a week in his childhood, remembering how his dad used to have a little rest before going back to work and how he was full of life despite everything, made him psychologically reinforced.







## School is **not only for lessons**

We had students who went through very difficult times because their parents lost their jobs due to the pandemic. This is the first time we felt so responsible for our students and their families. The school was, for some of our students, an opportunity to share their problems with us and their friends, friendly space to find solace and help. Now those possibilities are largely lost. While at school, we could identify the problems of our students were facing. In the classroom, we could see if they understood the lesson and if they had previously cried. We cannot notice these intangibles in a distance education setting. In this period everyone realised that school had become a different environment. School is not just a lesson. Support, calling our students by their name, and offering hugs is what happens at school.

## We had different experiences **with distance education**



In addition to all this, we want to share our experiences and opinions on distance education. Distance education was a saviour for us. It was much better than no training. Our students could reach us easily during this period. They called, sent messages when the lessons were over, everyone wanted to stop the recording and talk privately after the lessons were over, asking questions about their own fears and experiences before the lessons. It was possible for them to reach us via digital tools before, but they did not use them because we had



already met at school; however, they did make use of them during this period.

Sometimes parents attended our classes in distance education. There were people who asked questions and contributed. This was an experience we had never had before. Previously, problems in terms of time and place could arise for additional lessons. We have overcome this with distance education, we can agree on hours with our students and provide additional lessons.

**We experienced tests as well as opportunities**

However, it is not possible to see the dynamics of the classroom and the interaction between children in distance education. We have seen how important face-to-face education is, especially for children with disabilities and for younger children. In addition, students in underserved regions were unable to attend classes because they could not access a computer or the internet.

## Children want to talk about the current situation rather than a lesson

We missed our students, their noises, and even their strange sounds. Our students expect psychological support from us, not just lessons but also health advice. Our students have a serious lack of motivation. We also have a lack of motivation. We do not employ psychologists, but we have to provide psychological support to our students. Our students experience some difficulties so much that they sometimes just want to talk, not listen to a lecture. Children say that they do not want to do anything. They are bored and they say that they are looking forward to the re-opening of the school. Children want to talk more about the current situation than about the lesson.



This special group work has been  
**very good for us**



These are the feelings and experiences we share as a group of teachers working in Istanbul-Üsküdar. It was good for us to come together and talk about them, we hope reading about them will be good for you. We would be very happy if you shared your thoughts, feelings, and experiences with us. We hope this difficult period will pass quickly and we will meet our students in our classrooms as soon as possible.



Clinical Psychologist  
**Dr. Mehmet DİNÇ**



Clinical Psychologist  
**Gülcenur DİNÇER**

We would like to thank  
Dr. Mehmet Dinç,  
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part in the group work .

**THANK YOU.**





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