Teacher and Student Opinions on the Ethical Problems Experienced During Distance Education and Suggested Solutions

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Introduction

Due to how COVID-19 affected the whole world, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it to be a pandemic, and some mandatory precautions were taken in the field of education in this direction, as in every other field (Kahraman, 2020). The pandemic process has caused disproportionately negative effects on many countries' education systems, creating a universal impact on education and leading to the largest education disruption in recent history (United Nations, 2020). Distance education started with the interruption in face-to-face education and has resulted in certain ethical problems that have caused educators, policy makers, parents, and students to confront some fundamental ethical issues in education (Levinson & Edmond, 2020).

The implementation of distance education has provided students with many advantages in terms of information resource access, education, and evaluation methods. However, individuals may tend toward exhibiting unethical behaviors within the environment of distance education (Akbulut et al., 2008). A United States Department of Justice (Gearhart, 2001) report has stated this situation to be explainable through the concept of psychological distance. According to this;

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one faces the consequences of inappropriate and unethical behaviors in face-to-face interactions, but not seeing those one communicates with in distance education results in less personal behavior and facilitates information technologies being used in a way that harms others

This study aims to examine teachers' and students' opinions about the ethical problems experienced during distance education. With this aim, the research is thought to be able to contribute to filling the deficiencies identified in the field and to guiding educational institutions in determining the basic principles of ethics in distance education. At the same time, the study is considered important in terms of guiding policy makers about what regulation can be made regarding ethical problems in distance education by providing a theoretical infrastructure. In line with the general purpose of the research, answers were sought to the following questions:

- According to teachers and students, what ethical problems have been experienced during distance education?
- According to teachers and students, what ethical violations have been experienced during distance education?
- According to teachers and students, what should the main ethical principles in distance education be?
- According to teachers and students, what precautions can be taken to prevent ethical problems in distance education?

Method

Both teachers and students form the data source of the research, and their views and experiences on the problems encountered during distance education were examined using the phenomenological design, a qualitative research method.

Purposive sampling is a widely used sampling method in qualitative research and has been used to determine the study group of the research. Easy-access case sampling was used in the purposeful sampling. In this context, the participants of the research consist of 10 teachers working at different levels of public schools and 10 students studying in public schools.

Data Collection

The study data were collected from working teachers and students during the 2020-2021 academic year using an interview form with open-ended questions the researchers had prepared by examining the literature on distance education

in detail. In line with the information obtained from the literature, they created five separate open-ended questions each for the teachers and the students in order to obtain in-depth information about these questions. The interview form and its prepared questions were presented three academicians who are experts in the field of educational sciences for their opinions. The questions were finalized in line with the experts' feedback. After this stage, a pilot application was carried out with two people (i.e., one teacher and one student). During the pilot implementation, no changes were made to the questions, as no problem was seen to occur in regard to the interviewees' understanding the questions. Interviews were conducted using audio and video interview programs over the internet with 10 teachers and 10 students who had voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The interviews lasted from 55 minutes up to 1 hour and 20 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, during which the researchers took notes.

Data Analysis

The research data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. The data were presented within the framework of themes, categories, and codes by taking into account the common points of the coding. For this purpose, we listened to and transcribed the interview recordings, then coded and presented them under certain categories and themes.

Findings, Discussion and Results

According to the study findings, we determined the teachers and students to have experience ethical problems during distance education. As a result of the analyses, we specified the categories related to ethical problems to be communication problems, behavioral problems, digital distrust, and technical problems; the categories related to ethical violations to be violations of personal privacy, injustice/inequality, and dishonesty; and the categories related to ethical principles to be trust, honesty, personal privacy, responsibility, and equality. In order to eliminate these problems, we recommend making the attempts needed to create and adhere to ethical principles in distance education.

According to the findings of this study, the most commonly experienced ethical problems were behavioral problems for the teachers and inequality problems for the students. While dishonesty was the most commonly experienced ethical violations for teachers, students stated this as being dishonesty and invasions of personal privacy. The problems representing these sensitive ethical areas related

to the courses conducted through distance education during the pandemic have been identified. However, the remarkable point in terms of the research results is that the teachers and students are aware of these problems. Kidder (1995) argued the 21st century to require "moral awareness" (as cited in Beaudoin, 2009). In that case, developing the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will contribute to society based on teachers' and students' awareness of ethical problems is a goal that should be included in the agenda of global education.

Both the teachers and students in this study emphasized specific ethical principles such as equality, honesty, respect, and personal privacy. Needham and Johnson (2007) suggested that attention should be paid to specific ethical principles in distance education, and this also supports the current research results. They recommended that each institution: provide students with resources, support, and equal access to library services; respect confidentiality and privacy; defend intellectual freedom; avoid prejudice; and respect the integrity of intellectual property. The suggestions the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM, 2018) also made (i.e., observe ethical rules such as being honest and reliable, being fair and non-discriminating, and respecting others' privacy) resemble the results obtained in the present research. Although the faculty members who participated in Marek et al.'s (2021) study defined their students as ready to change their learning behaviors under the pandemic conditions, they also stated that many students do not attend online classes because they prefer face-to-face conversations, feel the online social environment to be insufficient, and have difficulty learning. Accordingly, providing guidance not only for using hardware and software but also for applying the distance education pedagogy can be said to be needed, as well as having studies focus on these.

According to the opinions of the teachers who participated in this study, ethical problems regarding measuring and evaluating, inappropriate course controls set up by administrators regarding personal privacy violations, ethical problems caused by lack of communication, personal rights violations, inequality, and lack of motivation are among the ethical violations and problems that have been experienced in the distance education process. Korkmaz and Toraman's (2020) study determined the problems experienced during the COVID-19 epidemic to include factors such as insufficient teacher-student interactions, the absence of reliable learning assessment tools, an inability to fully arrive at the learning outcomes, a lack of student motivation, problematic administrative behaviors. Lack of student motivation was also mentioned in the current study, and the students were seen

to suggest having practices implemented to ensure their own motivation in order to prevent ethical violations. According to Kawachi (2009), whose findings support those in the current research, ethics is defined as proactive interactions that trigger motivation towards lifelong learning in all students, and ethics in distance education should be involve all possible interactions.

Th teachers and students in this study expressed their views on ethical problems and ethical violations in distance education under such categories as digital security issues, personal privacy violations, and personal rights violations. In support of these findings, Forester and Morrison (1994) identified factors such as security problems related to the ethical problems computers caused, software theft, intellectual property issues, computer viruses being created, fundamental questions about software quality, data storage, and privacy violations. Accordingly, taking certain measures can be said to be necessary for preventing digital security issues, personal privacy violations, and personal rights violations for those using distance education.

The students and teachers who participated in this study referred to the concept of equality. While students expressed their opinions on equality under the headings of ethical problems, ethical violations, and ethical principles, they both emphasized equal opportunities as well as drew attention to the need to have individual equal rights in the classroom. Meanwhile, the teachers stated that they had taken individual precautions by making sure to treat students equally regarding the concept of equality and had made suggestions about the need for equality within ethical principles and for taking measures against inequalities in opportunities. In support of this research finding, studies are found in the literature to have emphasized the importance of equal opportunities (Ainscow, 2020; Hough et al., 2020; Neal & Georges Jr., 2020; Nichols, 2020; Stewart & Seauve-Rantajääskö, 2020).

According to the current research findings, the participant teachers took individual measures for dealing with the situations they view as ethical problems and ethical violations. What the teachers mentioned of note were personal privacy, control, motivation, proactivity, technical preparation, order, communication, tolerance/equality, cooperation/opinion sharing, ethical education, and education of moral values. Meanwhile, the students mentioned the concepts of personal privacy, respect/good manners, technical preparations, responsibilities regarding ethical issues, and taking precautions against ethical violations. Students have no authority or power to prevent ethical problems or ethical violations. This is why they stated institutional rather than individual measures should be taken.

In conclusion and in accordance with the study's findings, the need can be said to exist to establish ethical principles in distance education and to develop models that will enable teachers to comply with these principles. Creating the concepts of discipline, student-centered education, and participation in decision making is considered beneficial for providing the framework of this structure with systematic communications, motivations, sanctions, technological infrastructure, measurement and evaluation, digital security, personal privacy, personal rights, honesty, tolerance, equality, cooperation, respect, courtesy, control, proactivity, digital etiquette, responsibility, impartiality, personal accountability, and trust.

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