




Analysis of high school students 'opinions about distance education

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ABSTRACT

Distance education has brought some difficulties as well as providing certain conveniences to students. Within the scope of this study, it has been tried to examine the views of high school students of North Cyprus about distance education during the pandemic period. Qualitative research methods were used in the study with semi structured interviews carried out to gather up the data. Study group was consisted of 3 different high schools in 3 different provinces of North Cyprus. Results of the study revealed that although the students agree and benefit on certain points of distance education, they clearly prefer face to face education due to the disadvantages that online learning created. Findings show that the changing learning environment of the students negatively affected their learning motivation and they faced difficulty interacting with their teacher.

Keywords: distance education, digitalization, high school students, learning environments

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INTRODUCTION

Developments in technology have triggered change in education and this change revealed the need for restructuring education systems. One of the challenges that the education systems are facing today is distance education. Distance education facilitates students' access to information, creates learning environments without being bound by time and space factors, and offers the possibility of accessing information in a quicker way.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the global adoption of online learning, leading educational institutions to implement distance education as a primary mode of instruction (Dhawan, 2020). Despite ensuring educational continuity during lockdowns, distance education created challenges related to technological accessibility, student participation, and instructional quality (Sarı & Nayır, 2020). Education in North Cyprus is no exception in terms of getting affected by this challenge. Miralay (2020) asserts that the Moodle application implemented by North Cyprus Universities and high schools as an alternative method in order to avoid the loss of face-to-face learning.

According to Bozkurt (2017) distance education is a discipline that teaches, learns, and tries to eliminate the limitations of learning resources and the problems occurred by limitations, while using existing technologies. Distance education can also be defined as the continuation of educational and training activities by utilizing information and communication technologies to overcome the obstacle of students and

teachers being in different physical locations and to save time (Kılıç & Beldağ, 2021). Studies conducted during the pandemic indicated that students' learning outcomes in online environments were influenced by self-regulated learning skills, digital readiness, and the effectiveness of virtual instructional practices (Klein et al., 2021).

According to Kaplan et al. (2016), distance education can be classified into two categories: asynchronous and synchronous learning. The former involves delayed interactions such as pre-recorded tutorials or written guides allowing for a self-paced approach. In contrast, synchronous learning necessitates live, real-time engagement through platforms like online lectures. The choice between these strategies typically hinges on the specific learning objectives and the nature of the subject matter. When the pandemic started, a significant amount of countries had the chance to full exercise distance education. It was given through different methods in a synchronous/asynchronous manner, and the practice lessons and exams were completed by assigning homework to the students. (Bilgic & Tuzun, 2015; Setyosari et al., 2023).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic also affected Northern Cyprus, the pandemic measures lead the Ministry of National Education towards distance education as well. Teachers and students conducted their education and teaching activities remotely during this period. As a matter of fact, distance education emerged as a necessity rather than a choice in such conditions.

This research was conducted to determine the views of young high school students, following the start of the pandemic combat process after the first Covid-19 case was detected in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) in March 2021. The subsequent closure of schools, restrictions on working life, and transition to a restricted social life suddenly brought distance education as an indispensable reality to Northern Cyprus education life.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research method was used in the study. Qualitative research is a method that adopts an interpretive approach to examine the research problem, based on a holistic interdisciplinary perspective. The phenomena and events under investigation are considered within their own context and interpreted in terms of the meanings that people attribute to them (Altunışık et al., 2010).

Semi-structured interview technique was used in the study. The most commonly used method in qualitative research is interview technique. The data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek (2011), in descriptive analysis, "themes and sub-themes are created with the obtained data, and summaries and interpretations are made based on these themes. In addition, in descriptive analysis, direct quotations are frequently used to more effectively present the opinions of the interviewees (Creswell, 2007). The aim of this analysis is to present the findings to the reader in an organized and interpreted manner. After the themes and sub-themes were created, some sub-themes were combined based on the answers from the students. The frequency values of the subthemes are shown in all the of tables. The direct opinions of the students who participated in the research are also included below the tables.

Study Group

The research was carried out at 3 different high schools in 3 different provinces of North Cyprus. Study group consisted of 30 high school students, 10 each randomly selected respectively from the schools of Iskele, Guzelyurt and Nicosia Provinces. Ages of students participated in the study were between 15 and 18; 16 of them were female and 14 of them were male; 4 of them were ninth year, 6 of them were tenth year and 13 of them were eleventh year and 7 of them were twelfth year students. Three schools were selected using stratified sampling to ensure geographic diversity. Within these schools, male and female students were randomly chosen to form the study group.

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview form was used to gather teachers' opinions on distance education, constituting the qualitative data collection tool of the research. During the preparation of this semi-structured interview form, the literature was reviewed, preliminary interviews were conducted with the target audience, and a draft form was created. Participants were asked the following questions regarding distance education during the interviews:

1. Which advantages of distance education did you experience?
2. Which disadvantages of distance education did you face?
3. Which digital/electronic systems and devices did you use for distance learning and what are your thoughts about using them?

4. How did distance learning affect your motivation?
5. Do you think you can participate in distance learning classes as effectively as you would in a classroom setting?
6. Do you think educators are preparing effective course materials in distance learning?
7. Do you think education should continue online or face to face?

Data Analysis

In the qualitative part of the research, in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers about distance education to increase the credibility of the study, and their opinions were confirmed. Content analysis was performed on the data obtained from the interviews. The transferability of the qualitative part of the study was ensured by participant diversity and detailed description. As a requirement of detailed description, the findings were presented in graphs and figures, indicating the coding and number of sources. Within the scope of content analysis, the data were first coded, themes were obtained through the coded data, and the themes and codes were organized. Then, the findings were defined and interpreted. During the analysis process, the codes and themes obtained were compared by both researchers to ensure consistency. In addition, the codings and themes created were sent to two experts for consistency review. In addition, the coding and themes created were sent to two experts for consistency review. The coding was revised based on the feedback received. In the research, the participants' real names were not used and they were coded as "S".

RESULTS

Student Views on the Advantages of Distance Education

Table 1 shows the results of student views on the advantages of distance education that they experience. As it can be seen, there are 5 different views obtained. In general, 12 students stated that they felt comfortable at home while connecting their lectures online. 8 of them thought that they saved time without using transportation to reach the class and enjoyed their full sleep before the lectures start. Sample quotations from the participants are provided below:

Table 1. Views on the advantages of distance education that students experience

View	f
Feeling comfort at home while learning	12
Saving sleep and time	8
Sharing more with family	5
Advancing digital skills	4
Reaching the digital sources easily	1

"Being able to work comfortably at home, in a quiet environment, is the greatest benefit for me. I especially used to watch it while having breakfast. I would normally go to school without having breakfast because I didn't have time to eat it." (S1)

"Taking the bus to school was helpful for transportation because I didn't have to wake up early every morning to put on my school uniform. I enjoyed my sleep well before lectures start." (S11)

Student Views on the Disadvantages of Distance Education

As it can be seen from **Table 2**, students feel distracted by the remote education and faced difficulty with the homework load and understanding the lectures ($f=16$), by the the changed learning environment ($f=9$), find it difficult to concentrate at home ($f=3$) and saw the limited face to face interaction of student-teacher relationship as a disadvantage.

Table 2. Views on the disadvantages of distance education that students face

View	f
Facing difficulty with the homework load and understanding the lectures	16
Learning environment	9
Lacking concentration	3
Limited Face-to-Face Interaction	2

Some of the participants' opinions on the subject are as follows:

"I had difficulty completing the assignments and understanding the subject matter." (S2)

"There were too many distractions. It wasn't as intimate as a classroom setting." (S4)

"I experienced problems such as difficulty focusing, inability to ask questions about things I didn't understand, not being able to get answers, and difficulty practicing." (S13)

Student Views on the Digital Devices Used

As it can be seen from **Table 3**, 10 of the students use either computer or laptop as a connection device for online education. 8 of them use phone to connect and 6 out of this 8 find the phone easy to access for distance learning. Tablet users choose this device since they have other siblings and see it as feasible device to use. Some few students ($f=3$) use only T.V to follow the lectures given by the broadcast of state television and they say that it is the only option that they have in their home. Some students views shared below regarding this topic:

Table 3. Which devices did students you use for distance learning and theirs thoughts about using them?

Device	f	View	f
Computer/Laptop	10	Bigger Screen advantage of computer/laptop	8
Phone	8	Easy access of phone	6
Tablet	7	Need to share the other devices with the other siblings	14
TV	3	Having TV as the only option	2

"I used my phone because my computer was slow." (S1)

"I used my laptop for distance learning. Because the laptop screen is larger, I could see the pages better. That's why I preferred it over my phone." (S5)

Student Views on How Distance Learning Affect Motivation

Table 4 findings indicates that most of the students ($f=17$) either lost their motivation towards learning or negatively affected ($f=7$) due to the one way relationship between teacher versus student. Only just 3 of the student find the distant education as a positive fact affecting their motivation towards learning.

Table 4. Views on how distance learning affected student motivation

View	f
Motivation is dropped	17
Negatively affected since it is highly nonresponsive	7
Concentration dropped and that lead to a motivation decrease	3
Positively motivated	3

Sample statements are provided below:

"Remote learning lowered my motivation a bit; I didn't want to look at it too much. I think that was because I didn't want to disrupt my comfort zone and I didn't believe anything would happen." (S7)

"Distance learning initially sounded appealing to me. I thought I could study comfortably at home. My motivation was high. But my motivation dropped when I couldn't understand anything my teacher was explaining." (S1)

Student Views on Class Participation in Online Learning

Table 5 findings indicates that students are here divided into two groups in terms of views. Some of them thinks that online learning and answering questions in such a digital environment increased their active participation ($f=16$) whereas on the other hand, some students think that they faced difficulty in asking the things that they did not understand, in addition they felt they did not have much chance to interrupt the teacher. ($f=14$)

Table 5. Views of students' participation in distance learning and classroom settings

View	f
Actively participated to online classes	16
Faced difficulty to attend and adapt online classes	14

Related statements are shared below:

"Yes, I think so. Apart from practical classes like computer science and programming, I think I participate actively." (S8)

"No. I couldn't ask about the things I didn't understand. I got bored." (S6)

Student Views on Educators' Prepared Course Materials in Distance Learning

Table 6 findings indicates that some students find their teacher's materials as well prepared and sufficient for online learning ($f=10$) whereas on the other hand, significant amount of them criticize the materials and find them insufficient ($f=14$). Some students did not want to comment on this matter ($f=6$)

Table 6. Views of students about educator's course materials

View	f
Insufficient	14
Sufficient and well prepared	10
Can not comment	6

Related statements are shared below:

"They prepared it. They put in the effort. But I'm still bored. It's very difficult to listen to lectures when you're in vacation mode." (S10)

"I don't think the educators prepared effective teaching materials. They hardly provided anything other than written paragraphs. In some lessons, they explained the topic with

videos. But when I downloaded the videos to my phone, my phone's storage space was insufficient." (S2)

Student Views on the Further Continuation of Education

Table 7 findings indicates that most of the students want the face to face education to come back since they accept struggling in the distance education. (f=22) Contrary to this view, few of them support the continuation of the distance learning. (f=8)

Table 7. Views of students whether the distance education should continue or not

View	f
Face to face education should come back	22
Distance education can continue	8

Sample statements are provided below:

"Education should continue in a classroom setting because I learn from my friends while my teachers are teaching, and also every individual learns differently. Distance education is a bit more abstract learning, and the lectures and question-solving opportunities are limited." (S11)

"We should turn back to face-to-face instruction whenever the conditions are ready." (S16)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to Garilinska et al. (2023), ensuring access and equity to new technologies and addressing the technical and pedagogical challenges could be crucial for ensuring the success of distance education programs. Moving forward, it will be important for educators and institutions to strike a balance between leveraging the benefits of new technologies while also addressing the potential challenges and limitations they bring. In this study it was seen that students do believe on the positive sides (**Table 1**) of the online learning but they also criticize the new system with their views (**Table 2**).

In a study researched by Demirli (2002), students' opinions on web-based distance education were investigated. According to the research findings, students embraced the web-based distance education environment, expressed its independence from time and place as its most beneficial aspect, and reported positive opinions regarding its elimination of shyness in the classroom environment. On the other hand, it was also stated that the asynchronous communication was not sufficiently efficient. Our findings in **Table 5** and **6** shows in paralel that students did not find their educators' prepared materials sufficient enough and nearly half of them are unhappy about class environment and participation. From **Table 7** one can clearly observe that the students wanted the face to face education back after their online experience.

In a study conducted by Özkul and Aydın (2012), a survey was carried out among some students who were about to start university education regarding open and distance education. According to the findings of this study, half of the students who participated in the survey preferred blended learning to face-to-face and distance education. In addition, students preferred internet-based distance education more than open education. Furthermore, students who did not experience problems with internet access preferred internet-based distance

education. So similar thoughts were shared in this study for high schools student views.

Hong et al. (2021), did a research that underlined the disadvantages of online learning similarly to our findings, stating that subjects like science require experiments and physical interaction, which online formats struggle to replicate. In their study high school students were less behaviorally engaged in online environments compared to in-person classrooms.

Terkan and Ucar (2020) in their study found that the teaching staff did not have the knowledge to use the new technologies and integrate them into the learning-teaching process during pandemic. In **Table 6**, this study revealed that the students see their teachers as willing and laborious but still see their teacher as remaining insufficient in terms of using those technologies. Parallel to the findings of Terkan and Ucar (2020), which highlighted that teaching staff were aware of the advantages of distance learning, such as flexibility in location and time independence, the educators in this study also demonstrated limited awareness of how to effectively use these technologies in practice and how to contribute to students' learning experiences in particular.

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