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Analysis of Teachers' Approaches to Distance Education

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Abstract

Adapting teachers to evolving technology, and making them technology literate educators is a big challenge in today's world. However, teachers' attitudes towards new technologies are important in accepting changes in the responsibilities and roles. There are different reasons why teachers don't enjoy professional activities offered for them. It can be said that, first of all, professional activities offered do not meet their needs. In addition, the professional activities teachers are expected to participate conflict with their school activities and with their family responsibilities. Distance education can eliminate a large part of those reasons. For effective implementation of distance education, however, primarily the determination of teachers' attitude towards this technology is required. This study aimed to determine teachers' approaches to distance education. According to the survey conducted, the majority of participants stated that they wanted to participate in distance learning activities. On the other hand, participants, based on their observation about the distance education implementations, reported that distance education systems are insufficient in terms of content, materials used, evaluation methods, validity of certificate which is taken at the end of distance education and employment of opportunities. In addition, while more than half of the participants think that Turkish Open University programs are not adequate; about half of the participants that they don't trust distance education programs operated in Turkey.

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1. Introduction

In today's world shaped by technology, educators and other education related people and institutions believe that teacher education needs to be given more importance (Balcı, 2002). However, in the training of teachers, a number of barriers and problems, such as the huge number of teachers working in the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), the difficulty of bringing teachers together for training, the lack of opportunities in attending formal education institutions, are observed.

On the other hand, research conducted about teaching and teachers (Büyüköztürk, Akbaba-Altun & Yıldırım, 2010; Özer, 1990) indicated that the quality of teaching and teachers need to be improved. In recent years, undoubtedly one of the rapid advances in technology has been computers. Distance learning, with the use of computer technologies has come to the forefront in teacher education. National Ministry of Education has started to organize training in order to enhance the efficiency of operation staff including teachers and keep pace today's emerging technologies with computer and the internet (Çalimfidan, 2007).

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1.1.1.1. Purpose of the study

In this new era we live in rapid change and developments in science and technology are observed. Today, it could be claimed that educational institutions and teachers have an important role for communities to survive and adapting to these changes. In examining the reform efforts, one can see that developed countries in the world renewed their educational systems and started this process in the problems faced in teacher education. In parallel to social changes, traditional approaches are abandoned in the field of teacher training. In training of teachers in accordance with contemporary requirements, new applications are included within the framework of research and development activities (Aksarı, 1997).

According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), there is a high need for qualified teachers in Turkey (Büyüköztürk, Akbaba-Altun ve Yıldırım, 2010). Ministry of National Education has been carrying out so many projects in supplying the needs of qualified teachers. In this context, especially sites which aim to develop skills about informatics and sites aim providing training on different topics workers may benefit were published and put into effect (MEB HIEDB, 2012; MEB, NDA; MEB, NDb).

The basic purpose of these sites was providing in-service training to teachers by means of distance education. However, teachers' opinions which would guide any kind of activities addressed to help teachers need to be taken into consideration in order for these types of services to be effective and useful. Since teachers' views may lead the implementers to use different paths, it could be safe to say that taking teachers' opinions are vital for professional development projects which prepared for teachers to develop themselves to be successful.

In this regard, determination of teachers' views about distance education is important in terms of measures to be taken when working on the projects for teachers' professional development. Thus, this study aimed to determine the teachers' perspectives towards distance education.

2. Methodology

This study is a descriptive study. The purpose of the study was to investigate teachers' opinions about distance education. The working group for the study was obtained by suitable selection of the sample in terms of accessibility.

2.1.1.1. Study Group

The working group of the study consisted of 95 teachers who work in different cities of Turkey. In terms of gender, 63,15% of the participants were female and 36,85% of them were male. In terms of age distribution, 9% of the participants was 20-25 years old, 39% 26-30, 18% 31-35, 18% 36-40, 11% 41-45, 1% 51-55 and 3% was over 55 years old. Participating teachers had a wide range of teaching experience, such as 33% 1-5, 25% 6-10, 13% 11-15, 22% 16-20, 4% 21-25, and 2% more than 26 years of teaching experiment. 27% of participating teachers have master's degrees and 4% of participating teachers have PhDs. All of the participants have computers in their houses and 98% of those teachers have internet connection. In addition, participating teachers have been using computer for (44%) more than 10 years, (40%) 7-9 years, (15%) 4-6 years and (1%) 1-3 years. These users reported that they use computers at advanced, medium and beginning levels, 45% advanced level, 40% medium level and 15% at beginner level respectively. Finally, participants stated that 57% of them previously received distance education.

2.1.1.2. Data Collection Tool and Data Analysis

In order to collect data to determine teachers' views, two tools were used. The first tool was a survey questionnaire developed by researchers and the second tool was an attitude scale of distance education developed by Kışla (2005). The survey questionnaire consisted of two parts. Questions in the first part used to gather information about gender, age, professional seniority, educational status, type of school they work, computer and internet access and state of using the internet and computer. In the second part of the questionnaire, attitudes scale of distance education, there were 35 items aimed to get the opinions of teachers' about distance education. The scale was organized as a 5-point Likert scale. In analyzing the data frequencies and percentages were reported.

3. Findings and Discussion

According to the distribution of teachers' opinions about distance education as displayed in Table 1, it is seen that the vast majority of teachers (73,6%) want to take distance education courses. Ağır, Gür and Okçu (2008) found that teachers' attitudes towards distance education were positive in their study too. On the other hand, the rate of participants who thought distance education improved learning capacity is similar to the rate of those who thought many courses couldn't be done with distance education (respectively %59 and %60). In Baran's (2008) study, findings support the idea that distance education increases the quality of education. In this regard, Horzum (2003), who conducted a study about investigating faculty members' opinions on the internet supported distance education, obtained similar findings, revealed that all types of courses can be offered through distance education except professional and practical courses.

According to the findings of this study, 50.4% of the participants believe that distance education facilitates learning, 53.7% of people thought distance education makes people lazier and correspondingly 50.4% of them thought that distance education increases the quality of education. In Alakoç's (2001) study in which faculty members' views about distance education was examined, the majority of faculty members stated that distance education was effective. This finding is similar to the findings of this research.

Table 1. The Distribution of Teachers' Attitudes about Distance Education

<i>Items about Attitudes about Distance Education</i>		<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>Total</i>
1. I want to take distance education courses.	f	4	14	10	52	15	95
	%	4,2	14,7	10,5	58,0	15,6	100
2. Distance education develops a person's learning capacity.	f	4	19	16	45	11	95
	%	4,2	20,0	16,8	47,4	11,6	100
3. Many lessons can't be offered through distance education.	f	2	17	19	44	13	95
	%	2,1	17,9	20,0	46,3	13,7	100
4. Distance education facilitates learning.	f	5	20	22	42	6	95
	%	5,3	21,1	23,2	44,2	6,2	100
5. Distance education arouses interest.	f	2	18	10	55	10	95
	%	2,1	18,9	10,5	58,0	10,5	100
6. I don't think I would have a good circle of friends if I take distance education.	f	1	28	26	31	9	95
	%	1,1	29,5	27,4	32,5	9,5	100
7. Distance education makes people lazier.	f	6	24	14	43	8	95
	%	6,3	25,3	14,7	45,3	8,4	100
8. I think distance education is luxury for our country.	f	14	40	9	23	9	95
	%	14,7	42,1	9,5	24,2	9,5	100
9. Distance education enhances the quality of education.	f	7	20	20	41	7	95
	%	7,4	21,1	21,1	43,2	7,2	100
10. I don't think distance education is suitable for me.	f	14	38	13	29	1	95
	%	14,7	40,0	13,7	30,5	1,1	100
11. I think written materials which are used in distance education, are in good quality in terms of content.	f	6	13	29	41	6	95
	%	6,3	13,7	30,5	43,2	6,3	100
12. I don't think the certificate which would be given at the end of the distance education isn't valuable and valid.	f	12	23	15	38	7	95
	%	12,6	24,2	15,8	40,0	7,4	100
13. Distance education graduates are unlikely to find a job.	f	5	14	15	52	9	95
	%	5,3	14,7	15,8	54,7	9,5	100
14. Distance education is as respectable as classical education.	f	9	44	14	19	9	95
	%	9,5	46,3	14,7	20,0	9,5	100
15. I think that tools and equipment which are used in distance education are adequate.	f	7	30	23	30	5	95
	%	7,4	31,6	24,2	31,6	5,2	100
16. I am interested in distance education.	f	2	15	12	57	9	95
	%	2,1	15,8	12,6	60,0	9,5	100
17. Evaluation methods of distance education institutions are not suitable for this type of education.	f	3	13	37	38	4	95
	%	3,2	13,7	38,9	40,0	4,2	100
18. I think open university programs operated in Turkey are not adequate.	f	16	47	19	12	1	95
	%	16,8	49,5	20,0	12,6	1,1	100

	%	16,8	49,5	20,0	12,6	1,1	100
19. I think I would be more motivated in courses offered through distance education.	f	4	31	29	27	4	95
	%	4,2	32,6	30,6	28,4	4,2	100
20. I do not trust distance education programs in Turkey.	f	3	22	19	43	8	95
	%	3,2	23,1	20,0	45,3	8,4	100
21. I think instructors who have responsibilities in distance education are inadequate in terms of knowledge and skills.	f	4	16	28	41	6	95
	%	4,2	16,8	29,5	43,2	6,3	100
22. Distance education would positively affect my creativity.	f	4	15	41	32	3	95
	%	4,2	15,8	43,2	33,7	3,1	100
23. Structure of distance education increases efficiency.	f	1	36	21	37	0	95
	%	1,1	37,9	22,1	38,9	0	100
24. Having less face to face interaction in distance education bothers me.	f	1	37	18	35	4	95
	%	1,2	38,9	18,9	36,8	4,2	100
25. I think that distance education will be future educational model.	f	1	33	20	40	1	95
	%	1,1	34,6	21,1	42,0	1,2	100
26. The diversity of materials which is used in distance education draws my attention.	f	1	38	20	34	2	95
	%	1,1	40	21,1	35,7	2,1	100
27. The education which is given with distance education is not useful.	f	5	36	19	31	4	95
	%	5,3	37,9	20,0	32,6	4,2	100
28. I think some courses at universities could be offered through distance education.	f	1	32	16	41	5	95
	%	1,0	33,7	16,8	43,2	5,3	100
29. I learn better with distance education.	f	2	36	25	32	0	95
	%	2,1	37,9	26,3	33,7	0	100
30. Lecturers and students have lack of communication in distance education.	f	0	37	19	38	1	95
	%	0	38,9	20,0	40,0	1,1	100
31. Distance education reduces the students' achievement.	f	2	39	21	33	0	95
	%	2,1	41,1	22,1	34,7	0	100
32. The certificates given upon the completion of distance education aren't worth the tuition paid.	f	2	34	25	32	2	95
	%	2,1	35,8	26,3	33,7	2,1	100
33. The importance of distance education is increasing every day.	f	1	30	19	41	4	95
	%	1,1	31,6	20,0	43,2	4,1	100
34. Distance education draws my attention.	f	1	32	17	42	3	95
	%	1,1	33,6	17,9	44,2	3,2	100
35. I believe that distance education will restrict socialization.	f	1	37	16	38	3	95
	%	1,1	39,9	16,8	40,0	3,2	100

1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Undecided, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly Agree

According to the findings, 54.7% of participants thought that distance education would be eligible for them. In addition, participants who told "Distance education arouses my curiosity." was a majority with 68.5%. While percentage of participants who think that they would have a good circle of friend if being a part of distance education was 42%, percentage of participants who disagree with this subject was 30.4%. This finding was similar with findings of Turhan's (2005) research which was about managerial processes school administrators need to develop and their views about distance learning technologies. Findings of this study revealed that person's sense of loneliness was increased with distance education. On the other hand, findings also showed that most of the participants (56.8%) believe that distance education is not a luxury for our country.

Findings of this study also indicated that a majority of the participants (55.8%) believe that "distance education is not as respected as classical education". According to the findings, rate of participants who were agreeing with "the written materials that used in distance education are in good quality in terms of content" was 49.5%. However views about the validity of the certificate that will be given at the end of the distance education programs showed that a good number of participants (47.4%) do not believe in the validity of the certificate. In addition, the vast majority of participants (64.2%) believe that distance education graduates are unlikely to find a job. Kazu and Özdemir (2002), who conducted a study with pre-service teachers, reached a similar conclusion.

While the rate of participants' view about "tools and equipment which are used in distance education are adequate" item was 36.8%, the rate of disagreeing participants was even higher with 39%. However, the vast

majority of participants (69.5%) noted that they are interested in distance education. The percentage of participants who think "evaluation methods of distance education institutions are not suitable." was 44.2%, the percentage of participants who were "undecided" was more than other substances with 38.9. Finally, according to the findings of the study, the majority of respondents (66.3%) believe that Turkish Open University is not adequate.

4. The Results and Suggestions

There are many factors affecting the success of distance education systems. These factors don't include only the system characteristics and design, but also properties of people who join distance education. Distance education systems which are well designed to capture the success of a system can not be said to be sufficient alone. Other factors which aren't caused by the system may also affect the process. For example, learner characteristics and the expectations about distance education can be decisive about the possible outcomes and the effectiveness of the system. Therefore, in order to ensure the professional development of teachers with distance education before designing distance education, determining of teachers' expectations and views are so important. In this study, based on feedback from teachers, the measures would also enhance the effectiveness of the system. In teacher education, distance education is the right choice, when target audience characteristics, expectations, and their views are taken into account.

According to the survey results, teachers want to participate in distance learning activities. On the other hand, participants believe that distance education systems are inadequate in terms of content, materials used, evaluation methods, distance education and employment opportunities at the end of the validity of the certificate. Participants believe that Open University which is also carried out in our country is not adequate. At the same time, teachers don't trust distance education programs operated in Turkey.

In this study, according to the obtained results, distance learning courses can be said that it should be well planned for training to succeed. In addition, distance learning should be supported with face-to-face training in providing a more objective assessment. The majority of participant is interested in distance education. But they don't think distance education is respected as a classical education. In order to change this negative outlook, using high quality education materials in distance education and an objective evaluation system should be provided.

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