

# **Evaluation of the Distance Education Experiences of Tourism Guidance Department Students and Academic Staff in the Context of Critical Pedagogy**

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of tourism guidance department students in Turkey during the pandemic (COVID-19) process and the distance education process following the earthquake on February 6, 2023, in the context of critical pedagogy's characteristics of equal opportunity and dialogic learning. Using a descriptive phenomenological research design, data were collected from 15 academic staff working at universities in different regions of Turkey and 27 students studying at these universities through semi-structured interviews. The research findings show that students and academic staff experienced significant physical and infrastructural challenges during the distance education process, that inequality of opportunity was reproduced, and that dialogic learning disappeared. The research results were interpreted in the context of critical pedagogy's characteristics of equal opportunity and dialogic learning, and the validity of using the distance education model was discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Critical pedagogy, equality of opportunity in education, dialogic learning, tourism education.*

## **Introduction**

Education is a consciously planned and structured process aimed at enabling individuals to acquire knowledge, skills, values, and competencies. It serves various purposes, such as unlocking individuals' potential, developing their thinking skills, and supporting their adaptation to social and cultural norms (Dewey, 1961). Providing the most suitable learning environment to achieve these goals is as important as the scope of education. Especially since the beginning of 2020, when the process turned into a pandemic (WHO, 2020), the learning environment has become exceptional, transforming the learning process. Distance education has gone beyond being an option and has replaced formal education.

On March 18, 2020, it was announced that higher education in Turkey would transition to distance education (YÖK, 2020). In Turkey, where distance education was experienced for three semesters, covering the first half of 2020 and the whole of 2021, and where discussions on the process continue, universities switched to distance education for one semester after the earthquake on February 6, 2023. Although technological developments have been incorporated into the education process with distance education, the forced change in the learning environment has also made the equal opportunity and the power of dialogue in the learning process controversial. It is a situation discussed in the literature that distance education has negative effects on students' active learning styles even when it does not replace formal education (Bostock, 1997) and can never replace in-class education (Rosenberg, 2001). Research conducted on the distance education process during the pandemic has broadened this debate and clearly exposed the problems of distance education. Studies have consistently identified a range of problems in distance education, including technological deficiencies, inequalities, lack of dialogue, and low motivation (Fernández-Batanero, Montenegro-Rueda, Fernández-Cerero, &

Tadeu, 2022; Ulum, 2022; Stoian, Fărcașiu, Dragomir, & Gherheș, 2022; Kubikova, Bohacova, Slowik, & Pavelkova, 2024). However, the majority of studies conducted during the pandemic have focused on identifying the problems experienced in distance education. Studies discussing the problems of distance education within the framework of critical pedagogy have been limited. In neoliberal capitalism, education policies tend to operate in ways that prioritize the interests of particular social classes, thereby contributing to the reproduction and deepening of educational inequalities (Hill, 2023). The emergence of inequality of opportunity and the erosion of dialogic engagement for students from disadvantaged backgrounds further indicate the intensification of existing class divisions. In this regard, education cannot be understood as a neutral or autonomous sphere of knowledge transmission; rather, it is a domain fundamentally shaped by ideological and economic relations (Hill, 2022). Accordingly, the process of distance education should not be reduced to a mere descriptive account of existing conditions. In this context, the problems experienced in distance education cannot be explained solely by pedagogical or technical limitations; they should also be understood in relation to the broader neoliberal transformation of education. This study examines the distance education experiences of students and teaching staff in tourism guiding departments—where culture- and foreign language-based courses, as well as practice-oriented instruction, are central, and where dialogic learning plays a crucial role, particularly among students predominantly from non-elite family backgrounds—within the framework of critical pedagogy, with a specific focus on equality of opportunity and dialogue

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **The Development Process of Distance Education**

Distance education is defined as planned teaching and learning activities provided independently of time and place using an institutional communication

channel (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Distance education practices, which began in the 1700s with letters (Çoban, 2012), have been offered as an alternative to formal education with the development of technology. The distance education process is carried out through web-based applications (Al & Madran, 2004) managed using internet-based technologies in line with technological transformations. Distance education offers features that increase teaching opportunities, such as independence from time and place, flexibility in teaching environments and methods, increased resources, and low cost (Arslan, 2013). However, it also brings with it disadvantages such as lack of interaction, connection problems, application problems, and the high cost of technology (Arslan, 2013; Işık & Bahat, 2021).

While the advantages of distance education paint a positive picture for education, when disadvantages such as the high cost of technology and insufficient internet access are considered, it creates a situation that deepens opportunity inequality and restricts social mobility. Among the factors determining the quality of education, the quality of practical courses, ensuring student participation, and equal accessibility to the learning environment play an important role (Chandra, Rajan & Chocdhary, 2022). Therefore, it does not seem possible to fully replace the interactive and practice-based environment offered by face-to-face education with other methods. Discussions about distance education, have intensified, especially during the pandemic and after the February 6 earthquake in Turkey. In this context, it is beneficial to evaluate distance education separately for the pandemic period.

### **Distance Education During the Pandemic**

When examining issues related to distance education independently of the pandemic process, internet access and hardware deficiencies, lack of dialogue, and socialization problems stand out for students; while for educators,

legislation, infrastructure, human resources, content, and implementation difficulties are the most emphasized issues (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Anderson, 2008; Barari, Rezaei Zadeh, Khorasani & Alami, 2020; Burns, 2011; Korucu & Alkan, 2011; Littlefield, Rubinstein & Laveist, 2020). In particular, the fact that distance education materials differ from traditional teaching materials significantly affects the quality of distance education (Al-Samarraie, Teng, Alzahrani & Alalwan, 2017; Chao, Saj & Tessier, 2006; Lloyd Byrne & McCoy, 2012). In fact, materials can form the basis of negative views of distance education (Seaman, 2009). However, since distance education involves teaching methods that differ from traditional education (Burns, 2011), it is not reasonable to expect every educator to possess all the competencies required for distance teaching. Moreover, during the pandemic, more comprehensive problems than materials and teacher competencies emerged in distance education.

The sudden, unprepared, and mandatory transition to distance education during the pandemic (Al Lily, Ismail, Abunasser & Alqahtani, 2020) has made the general problems associated with distance education even more apparent.

Firstly, while students began to experience serious stress due to the intense online classes, they were caught unprepared for, distance education, which was conducted in online classrooms and was a new experience, became an additional burden for educational institutions (Lei & So, 2021). Educators' working hours became flexible and permeated their entire lives (Barata, 2025). The pandemic has rendered existing class inequalities in capitalist societies more visible and pronounced (Hill, 2021), thereby exacerbating pre-existing inequalities within education systems. Research conducted during the pandemic (Akbal & Akbal, 2020; Aktaş, Büyüktaş, Gülle, & Yıldız, 2020; Altun Ekiz, 2020; Arora & Srinivasan, 2020; Bozkurt, 2020; Buluk & Eşitti, 2020; Can, 2020; Chandra, Ranjan & Chowdhary, 2022; Çakın & Akyavuz, 2020; Demirdelen Alrawadieh, 2022; Genç, Engin & Yardım, 2020; Gökdaş & Kayri, 2005; Hilli, 2020; Işık & Bahat, 2021; Işkın, Şengel, Genç & Uzut, 2022;

Kahraman, 2020; Keleş, Kurt Dündar & Katırcıoğlu, 2022; Karakuş, Ucuzsatar, Karacaoğlu, Esendemir & Bayraktar, 2020; Keskin & Özer Kaya, 2020; Kürtüncü & Kurt, 2020; Lall & Singh, 2020; Lau, Yang & Dasgupta, 2020; Özer & Suna, 2020; Serçemeli & Kurnaz, 2020) stated that serious problems have emerged, such as low educational interaction due to internet access, quotas, poor quality and lack of hardware, inadequate working environment, economic, family, and social reasons, lack of dialogue in the learning environment, measurement and evaluation problems, and the inability of every educator to conduct educational processes with the same quality. When delving into the root causes of these problems, it is possible to conclude that the negative experiences do not merely point to the learning environment; rather, each problem stems from inequality of opportunity or a lack of dialogue and is therefore political in nature. In this context, the problems associated with the distance education process fall within the scope of critical pedagogy.

### **Critical Pedagogy**

Critical theorists argue that education must be examined as part of the existing social and political structure within its own historical, political, economic, and social context, because education cannot be independent of these factors (Capper, 1993; Balçı, 2003; Tezcan, 2005). Critical pedagogy is a theory that discusses education and the education system not only as a technical structure but also in terms of its philosophical, ideological, sociological, and political dimensions (Glenn, 2002; McLaren, 1998). Critical pedagogy is associated with the work of Paulo Freire. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2008), Freire emphasizes the power of education in combating social injustices and argues that the oppressed are passivized and suppressed in the educational process. Hooks (1994) states that critical pedagogy promotes democratic participation and social change by enabling students to understand social issues, develop critical thinking skills, and challenge inequalities. According to Giroux (2011),

critical pedagogy is an educational approach that questions power relations, structural inequalities, and cultural hegemony in the educational process and offers a transformation-oriented approach in this direction.

Cho (2012) classifies critical pedagogy studies into theoretical, pedagogical, and political categories. Accordingly, theoretical studies focus on critical theory, which forms the basis of critical pedagogy, including neo-Marxist theory, post-structural theory, postmodern theory, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory, while pedagogical studies focus on the micro level of critical pedagogy, covering teaching processes and environments. The main focuses of political studies are issues such as global capitalism, neoliberalism, race, gender, sexuality, mass media, popular culture, and technology. Especially in a process with global effects such as the pandemic, it is impossible to consider critical pedagogy as unrelated to global capitalism and neoliberalism, as well as mass media and technology. Considering that during the pandemic, education became a commodity accessible and usable only by those who could access online environments, and that dialogue disappeared from the learning process, it can be clearly stated that the process falls within the scope of critical pedagogy.

In Ural's (2024) inventory study aimed at identifying the characteristics of critical pedagogy, considering that critical pedagogy is egalitarian and justice-oriented, equates the right to education with the right to life, defines dialogue as the natural source of knowledge, and views it as a tool for equality, it would be appropriate to evaluate the educational process during the pandemic in the context of critical pedagogy's opportunity equality and dialogue.

### **Equality/Inequality of Opportunity**

Equality is an ethical and social ideal in which individuals should be in the same position and have the same value (Mercik, 2015). Equality of opportunity in education is a multidimensional phenomenon with significant individual and social implications. The most visible and obvious form of equality of

opportunity in education is equality in opportunities for success (Education Reform Initiative, 2020). The ability to exercise the right to education within inequality depends on the economic and social status of families (Bilgin & Erbuğ, 2021; Fırat, Erten, Ödemiş & Yaşar, 2024; İnan & Demir, 2018).

Therefore, differences in opportunity equality also affect students' academic achievement (Saribaş & Babadağ, 2015). In addition, families' economic, social, and cultural differences play an important role in students' access to education (Ömür, Bahat & Ernas, 2017).

While equality of opportunity in education not only increases individuals' chances of success, it also has the potential to transform the social structure. However, this equality cannot be achieved solely by ensuring that opportunities are equal in physical and material terms. Equality also necessitates the development of a critical perspective that questions individuals' rights in education and their place in society. Critical pedagogy is an approach that views education not only as a tool for transmitting knowledge to individuals, but also as part of the struggle for social transformation, liberation, and equality (Freire, 2008; Giroux, 2008). This approach aims to develop students not only academically, but also socially, by criticizing power relations in education. Giroux (2011) argues that the current education system has the potential to reproduce class inequalities and oppressive structures, while maintaining that a more democratic, participatory, and equitable education model can be built through critical pedagogy.

Freire (2008) defines critical pedagogy as a domain where teachers and students can question social inequalities in education. From this perspective, ensuring equal opportunities in education is not limited to balancing economic and social differences; it also enables students to develop a critical awareness of these inequalities (Freire, 2008). Giroux & McLaren (1989) advocate designing

schools as environments where students can play a role in social transformation by building a democratic community. Thus, education becomes an important tool not only for the academic success of individuals but also for the achievement of social justice and equality (Giroux & McLaren, 1989). Therefore, inequality in the educational process undermines most expectations regarding the goals of education.

Equality of opportunity is based on the view that individuals must have access to existing opportunities or resources in order to be successful in life (Ashford, 2015). In order to ensure equality of opportunity in education by developing the quality of learning environments in line with the principle of equality, it is important to increase the duration of compulsory education, physical resources, and school enrollment rates, and to strengthen the technological infrastructure. The concept of equality of opportunity in education is evaluated in the context of regional characteristics, student characteristics, the socio-economic status of the family, student achievement, and school effect. Furthermore, regional differences, socio-economic conditions, socio-cultural infrastructure, access to education, educational level, and gender are considered significant barriers to equality of opportunity (Işık & Bahat, 2021).

Especially during the pandemic, the process of distance education and home schooling has created new requirements for each learner, such as a quiet, individual learning space with minimal distractions, a high-speed internet connection, individual equipment such as a computer, headphones, and a camera that does not need to be shared with others, and parental guidance. However, being unprepared for the process hindered the implementation of education and training at the desired level in distance education environments (Yıldız & Akar Vural, 2020). At this point, inequality of opportunity in accessing distance education during the pandemic emerged (Işık & Bahat,

2021), and students from rural areas or low-income families, in particular, experienced serious difficulties in accessing classes due to technical limitations, which deepened the inequality of opportunity (Ural & Nefayaz, 2024).

### **Dialogic learning**

One of the fundamental principles of critical pedagogy is viewing the educational process as a dialogic relationship. In this approach, the relationship between the teacher and the student is defined not as a one-way transfer of knowledge, but as a process based on mutual respect, interaction, and the creation of meaning (Freire, 2008). In critical pedagogy, “dialogic learning” is central to learning because this method allows individuals to question and transform both themselves and the world (Ural & Nefayaz, 2024). McLaren (1998) states that critical pedagogy is an educational approach in which students are seen as active participants rather than passive recipients. Freire (2008) suggests establishing a relationship between teacher and student based on dialogic learning and collaboration and emphasizes the need to create a space for the oppressed to make their voices heard, express themselves, and be active participants in the educational process. According to Giroux (2007), critical pedagogy aims to create an environment where teachers and students question the relationships between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, and learning and social change in the processes of knowledge production. Dialogic learning is also important as a mechanism that encourages students' active participation in the process of accessing and producing knowledge. Wegerif (2007) considers dialogue not as a tool for learning, but as the essence of education. When viewed from a critical pedagogy perspective, the one-way communication structure of distance education poses a serious problem. For example, in a study conducted by Ural & Nefayaz (2024) with teachers, it was stated that the lack of interaction in distance education significantly weakened the teaching-learning process; students remained passive, classroom dynamics

were disrupted, and the teaching process progressed largely teacher-centered. Similarly, many studies covering distance education problems during the pandemic have revealed that qualified interaction did not occur (Garlinska, Osial, Proniewska, & Pregowska, 2023; Kabak, 2025; Rakhmatullaev, 2023; Ulum, 2022; Xiao, Tian, & Xu, 2023), which, from a critical pedagogy perspective, means that dialogic learning did not occur.

### **The Purpose of Research**

The general purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of students and academic staff in undergraduate tourism guidance programs regarding distance education implemented in Turkey during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the February 2023 earthquake, within the context of the equality and dialogue characteristics of critical pedagogy. In line with this general objective, answers were sought to the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of tourism guidance department students and academic staff regarding physical and infrastructure problems during the distance education process?
- What are the experiences of tourism guidance department students and academic staff regarding equality/inequality of opportunity in the distance education process?
- What are the experiences of tourism guidance department students and academic staff regarding dialogic learning in the distance education process?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Model**

This qualitative research, designed using a descriptive phenomenological research design, aims to evaluate the experiences of tourism guidance department students and academic staff on distance education in Turkey, based on the characteristics of critical pedagogy, inequality of opportunity, and lack of

dialogic learning. Phenomenological research explores individuals' past experiences related to a phenomenon or concept. In this process, researchers collect data from people who have experience with the phenomenon and produce a comprehensive description (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon of this research is distance education.

### **Study Group**

The participants in this study consist of students who participated in the distance education process in Tourism Guidance departments both during the pandemic and after the February 2023 earthquake, as well as academic staff who taught during this process. Participants were determined using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018), which is based on consciously selecting individuals with the most relevant information for the research objective.

Using maximum diversity sampling, one of the types of purposive sampling, care was taken to include individuals with different demographic characteristics that could be relevant to the research problem. In this context, the participant group consisted of 15 academic staff and 42 students from different geographical regions who had been actively involved in the distance education process both during the pandemic and after the February 2023 earthquake. Information about the academic staff and students in the study group is presented separately in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table-1: Data on Academic Staff (A) in the Study Group**

	Age	Gender	Professional Experience	Marital Status	Academic Title	Region
A1	43	Male	8 years	Married	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Black Sea
A2	43	Male	15 years	Married	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Aegean
A3	51	Male	24 years	Married	Prof. Dr.	Aegean
A4	43	Male	15 years	Married	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Black Sea
A5	49	Male	24 years	Married	Prof. Dr.	Central Anatolia
A6	45	Female	21 years	Married	Prof. Dr.	Marmara
A7	38	Male	12 years	Married	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Southeastern Anatolia
A8	48	Male	11 years	Married	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Aegean
A9	44	Female	18 years	Single	Prof. Dr.	Mediterranean
A10	38	Male	11 years	Married	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Black Sea
A11	47	Female	14 years	Single	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Southeastern Anatolia
A12	45	Female	14 years	Married	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Central Anatolia
A13	66	Male	36 years	Married	Prof. Dr.	Marmara
A14	40	Male	12 years	Married	Assoc. Prof. Dr.	Eastern Anatolia
A15	65	Female	12 years	Single	Prof. Dr.	Mediterranean

As shown in Table 1, 10 of the academic staff in the study group are male and 5 are female. In terms of marital status, the vast majority of participants are married individuals. The professional experience of the academic staff ranges from 8 to 36 years. Academic staff working in every geographical region of Turkey were included in the participant group.

**Table 2: Data on Students in the Study Group**

	Age	Gender	Number of Siblings	Region
S1	23	Female	1	Black Sea
S2	23	Male	2	Black Sea
S3	23	Female	1	Aegean
S4	24	Female	0	Aegean
S5	23	Female	0	Aegean
S6	23	Male	0	Aegean
S7	24	Female	1	Black Sea
S8	24	Female	2	Black Sea
S9	24	Female	1	Central Anatolia
S10	37	Female	0	Central Anatolia
S11	34	Female	1	Marmara
S12	23	Male	1	Marmara
S13	25	Male	2	Southeastern Anatolia
S14	23	Female	1	Southeastern Anatolia
S15	23	Male	0	Mediterranean
S16	24	Female	1	Mediterranean
S17	24	Female	4	Black Sea
S18	24	Female	1	Black Sea
S19	25	Female	0	Southeastern Anatolia
S20	23	Female	0	Southeastern Anatolia
S21	23	Female	0	Central Anatolia

S22	23	Female	1	Central Anatolia
S23	25	Female	0	Marmara
S24	24	Female	1	Marmara
S25	24	Female	1	Eastern Anatolia
S26	25	Male	2	Mediterranean
S27	24	Female	0	Mediterranean

As shown in Table 2, 21 of the students are female and 6 are male. Thirteen of the students have one sibling, three have two siblings, and one has four siblings. Just like the teaching staff, the students are enrolled at universities located in every geographical region of Turkey.

### Data Collection Tool

In the study, a semi-structured interview form was used as the data collection tool. Although the researcher proceeded according to a specific set of questions, this form allowed participants to freely express their own experiences and thoughts. In semi-structured interviews, questions are flexible and allow participants to explain their personal perspectives in depth (Merriam, 2018). The interview form contains a total of 17 open-ended questions, structured in line with the purpose and sub-purposes of the research, suitable for both students and academic staff, and consisting of three sections. The first section contains questions aimed at determining participants' individual experiences regarding the distance education process, particularly the problems they encountered in terms of physical conditions and technological infrastructure. The questions in the second section aim to identify participants' experiences and observations regarding inequality of opportunity, while the questions in the third section aim to identify their experiences and observations regarding the learning process.

The interview form was submitted to three academicians specializing in the field for evaluation before its final version was drafted; necessary content and phrasing changes were made based on expert opinions. Subsequently, pilot

interviews were conducted, and the final version of the interview form was completed. The interviews were conducted between April 24 and May 30, 2024, online (Zoom, Google Meet, etc.) and in person, depending on the participants' availability. Each interview lasted between 15 and 45 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent.

### **Ethics Committee Decision**

This research was conducted with the approval of the Ethics Committee of Ondokuz Mayıs University, dated June 25, 2020, and numbered 2020/177.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were reviewed independently by the researchers, and consistency in coding and theme development was ensured through intercoder agreement. In line with the purpose of the study, interview data were presented with direct quotations. Participants were numbered in the presentation of interview data (A1, S1..). Thematic analysis was performed using MAXQDA software to visualize the obtained data. This process was guided by the research objectives, allowing for both an examination of the current situation and an interpretation of the findings in relation to inequality of opportunity and dialogue within a critical pedagogy framework. A comparative analysis of the views of both groups was performed using two case models. The combined use of direct quotations and thematic analysis contributed to the credibility of the findings and strengthened the overall coherence of the analysis.

### **Validity and Reliability**

To ensure that the data collection tool used in the study was valid in terms of content and form, expert opinion was sought. In addition, a pilot study was conducted with four participants to evaluate the interview form in terms of its comprehensibility, scope, and clarity of questions; based on the feedback

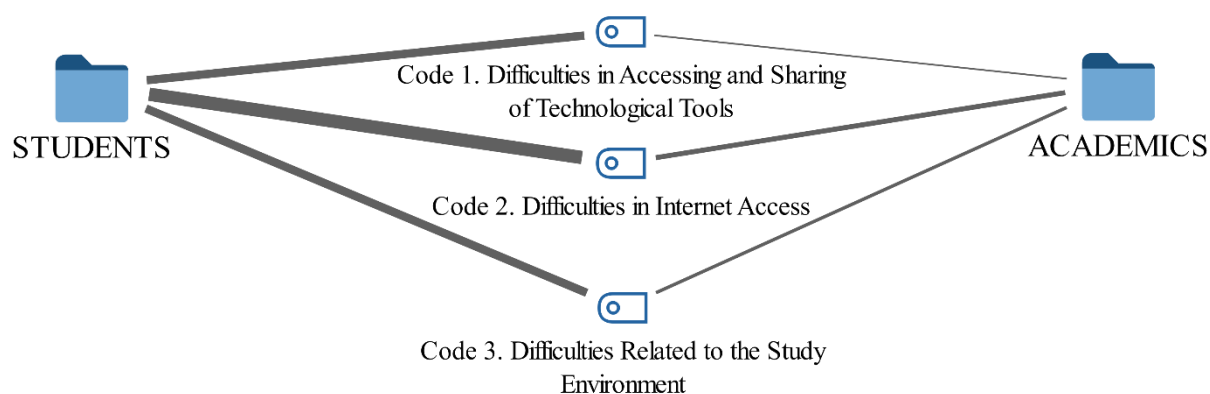
obtained, the necessary adjustments were made to the interview form, and its final version was drafted. To increase the external reliability of the research, the concepts included in the study were clearly defined; the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes were explained in detail. The selection of individuals participating in the research, the conditions of participation, and how the data collection process was conducted were systematically presented. The data obtained are stored in an organized and accessible manner for future reviews that may be required. These approaches are based on the principles of transparency, traceability, and clarity, which are important in qualitative research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018), and are among the fundamental elements that ensure the scientific validity and reliability of the research.

## **FINDINGS**

The research findings, in line with the research questions, have been presented by topic, without distinguishing between academic staff and students, covering their experiences regarding the physical and technological infrastructure during the distance education process, as well as the equality of opportunity and dialogue characteristics of critical pedagogy. Two case models created for each research question using the MAXQDA program were used to reveal the experiences of both groups and classify them in a comparative manner.

### **Experiences Regarding Physical and Infrastructure Problems in Distance Education**

As seen in the Two-Case Model in Figure 1, it is noteworthy that the common experiences of both students and academic staff regarding physical and infrastructure problems are concentrated in the issues of “*internet access,*” “*working environment,*” and “*access to and sharing of technological tools.*”



**Figure 1. Two-Case Model of Experiences with Physical and Infrastructure Problems in the Distance Education Process**

Internet access issues were a problem frequently mentioned by students during interviews, reflected in various ways such as disconnections and complete loss of internet connection, infrastructure deficiencies, and insufficient data packages. This situation directly and negatively affected students' participation in the distance education process. An example of infrastructure problems is S1: *"I only had problems when the power went out. One day there was no electricity, my phone and computer were almost out of charge, I contacted my relatives, they brought me a power bank, and I was taking an exam, I submitted it in the last 5 minutes, it was a stressful process,"* S5 *"I had internet, but when we entered the class, I experienced frequent freezing and disconnections,"* and S15 *"My internet connection went down during the exam. There were also a few times when my internet completely went out 5-6 minutes before the exam."*

These comments highlight the impact of power and internet outages during classes and exams on the conduct of classes and exam evaluations.

Some students stated that they had to participate in distance education under disaster-stricken conditions, noting that accessing technological resources became even more difficult during the post-earthquake period. S23 stated, *"I was residing in the earthquake zone. There were many connection interruptions,"* and S26 stated, *"I remember attending classes in a tent. I turned on mobile data and used it that way."*

Academic staff stated that the high traffic caused by simultaneous use, combined with inadequate internet infrastructure, made it difficult to conduct classes effectively. Commonly mentioned problems during the interviews included complete disconnection, freezing, slowness, and system problems. A4's assessment that *"We experienced serious problems during the whole process. The internet in our city is not very reliable. There were intermittent disconnections and freezing; we experienced significant connection and speed problems,"* highlights the inadequacy of the internet infrastructure.

Furthermore, academic staff noted that internet disconnections affected not only their own course delivery but also students' access to classes (A10: *"Both the students' and my connection was lost multiple times during class, and there were loading and lags during that period because everyone was taking online classes,"* A14 *"Sometimes there were connection errors originating from the university's server"*) and that this situation stemmed from the internet infrastructure and even occurred during exams.

Students experienced severe problems not only with internet outages but also with the lack of basic technological equipment such as computers, headphones, or cameras, and this situation affected their active participation in classes. S16 stated using a borrowed computer, *"I didn't have a computer. I borrowed one from my aunt"*, which shows that not all students have equal access to technological devices. S12 indicated that they had problems actively participating in classes, stating, *"I didn't have a camera, and in some classes, we were required to turn on our cameras, but I couldn't."* At the same time, the limited number of these devices in the home and the need to share them in crowded homes presented a separate problem. For example, S24's assessment, *"My sibling and I sometimes had overlapping classes. One of us tried to join the class via phone while the other tried to join via computer,"* draws attention to the lack of technological devices within the home.

Some students, even if they had access to adequate technical equipment, experienced difficulties in maintaining regular attendance and focusing on their studies due to their home environment not being suitable for distance education. Factors such as studying in shared spaces, noise, distractions, and lack of personal space further complicated the process. For example, S1 stated, *“When I was home alone, the door would ring in the middle of class, I would go and open it, and I would leave the class,”* and S24 stated, *“I had no personal space because I shared a room with my sibling,”* expressing that the learning environment was not like a classroom. Similarly, teaching staff also pointed out that the home environment was not conducive to education and teaching. Factors such as multiple individuals being online at the same time, lack of space, and the overlap of family and professional roles made it difficult for teaching staff to conduct their lessons. For instance, A1: *“You have to teach three different subjects at the same time, and not every part of the house is suitable for that. For example, my child's teacher asks them to turn on their camera, so I turn on mine, and we experience difficulties during that moment.”*; A6: *“While I was in class, my daughter was shouting, ‘Mom! The internet went out!’ My other daughter was shouting from the other room, ‘Mom! The power went out, what am I going to do?’ while I was in class.”* and *“My husband is also a teacher, he had no room left at home, he had to work in the kitchen“*; and A12 *“Because of my crying baby, a relative was with me during the lesson”* enabled this finding.

Participants stated that these problems they experienced during the distance education period negatively affected their participation in classes and their learning processes. Student and faculty opinions reveal that the physical and infrastructure problems experienced during the distance education period are not limited to technical glitches but also point to a problem area that deepens inequality of opportunity. Students' inability to access basic needs such as

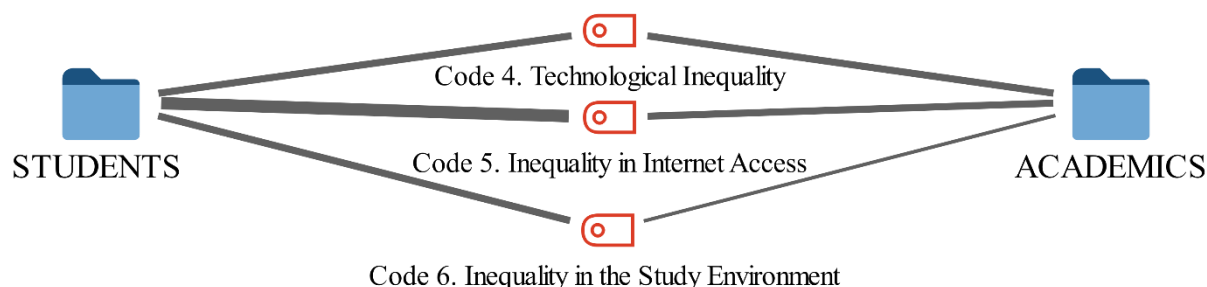
internet access, technological tools, and a suitable working environment at an equal level demonstrates that the principle of fairness in education has been undermined. Similarly, teaching staff's lack of technical equipment and responsibilities that conflict with their domestic roles have limited their active participation in the education process. These problems have not only created inequality of opportunity but also laid the groundwork for a lack of dialogic learning by negatively affecting interaction in the learning process. In particular, connection problems experienced during synchronous classes have disrupted communication between students and teaching staff; the learning process has been reduced to a one-way transfer of information. Consequently, findings related to physical and infrastructure conditions appear to be linked to critical pedagogy characteristics, particularly inequality of opportunity and lack of dialogic learning. In this context, the subsequent sections examine in greater detail how these inequalities and communication barriers are reflected in the experiences of students and instructors in the distance education process.

### **Experiences Related to Inequality of Opportunity in the Distance Education Process**

Findings related to physical and infrastructure issues reveal that students experienced problems in both internet access and access to and sharing of technological tools, as well as in their working environment during the distance education process, indicating that not all students had equal opportunities. This issue has concretely highlighted inequality of opportunity through the experiences of both students and teaching staff, encompassing not only themselves but also others.

The views of both students and teaching staff show that the problems of inequality of opportunity experienced by other students are particularly concentrated in the areas of technological inequality, inequality in internet access, and inequality in the working environment. The Two Case Model in

Figure 2 shows a comparative view of the shared experiences of both students and academic staff regarding inequality of opportunity.



**Figure 2. Two-Case Model of Experiences Related to Inequality of Opportunity in the Distance Education Process**

Students have stated that some of their peers face serious obstacles in participating in distance education. Student experiences, particularly regarding economic hardship, lack of technological equipment, and internet access issues, show that a strong awareness of educational inequality in the distance education process has developed and that this situation bothers them. Students who are relatively better off financially have observed that their peers cannot access technology, cannot follow lessons, and that this leads to failure. A student (S8) pointed out the inequality of opportunity, stating, *"Some of my friends didn't have computers, so they accessed classes via their phones. They had a very hard time both following the lessons and doing their homework. Some of my friends didn't even have internet access."* Similarly, S6 pointed out that their friends were not on an equal footing with them in terms of technological capabilities, stating, *"On exam day, some of my friends didn't have internet access. The teacher had to drop them because the exam time was up. What can these people do?"* Furthermore, some students emphasized their sensitivity to social inequality by stating that they were more privileged than others and felt quite uncomfortable about this situation. For example, S2 said, *"I had everything, but I can't say the same for my friends. That's why I always felt inadequate on their*

*behalf. It's as if they would have been more successful if they had had those opportunities.”*

Most academic staff have stated that students are unable to attend classes due to reasons such as running out of internet quota, being unable to access a computer, or having to share devices with family members. A12's assessment, *“The student is not doing well, the internet at home is not sufficient, the quota is running out. Many of my students said, ‘I don't have a quota, my phone or computer is needed by my younger sibling, ’”* is consistent with student evaluations and shows that students do not have equal opportunities. The fact that not every student's home environment is suitable for education is also among the issues that draw attention to inequality. Distracting elements such as physical spaces shared with family members and noise have negatively affected some students' participation in class. For example, A3's assessment, *“When I joined the class, sometimes there were disturbing noises, and I would get answers like, ‘What did you say? My mom is cooking, and I'm in the kitchen, ’”* clearly shows that not every student's study atmosphere is equal.

Some students have explicitly stated that their economically disadvantaged classmates experienced inequality in distance education. S11: *“I was doing my lessons in my own room, on my own computer, with good internet. But some of my friends had to share a computer with their siblings at the same time. How is that equality?”* Again, after the February 2023 earthquake, students stated that the earthquake conditions made inequality of opportunity more visible. For example, S9 said, *“My friend was staying in Hatay. There was no internet, and the environment he was living in was very poor. He said he was studying in a tent. You can't expect him to succeed in such an environment.”* and S4 said, *“Can people whose homes were destroyed in the earthquake focus on distance*

*education? Even we can't concentrate on our lessons, so how can they learn?"*, expressing how they felt about inequality of opportunity.

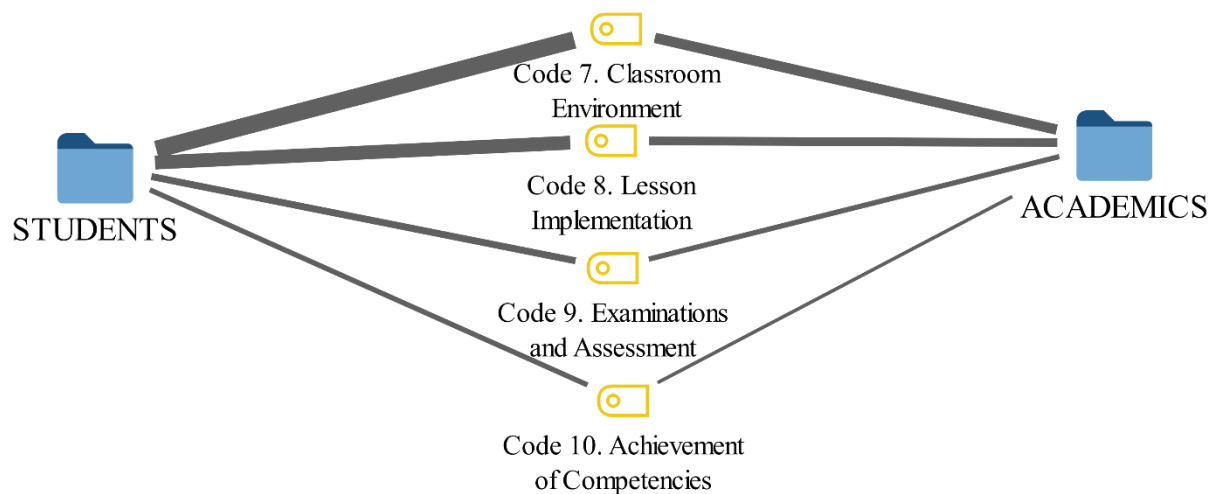
Academics have assessed the source of inequality in the home study environment in terms of socioeconomic differences, in addition to access to the internet and technological equipment. The majority of academics stated that students' access to and participation in the distance education process stemmed from economic inadequacies. For example, A10 stated, *"All my students experienced serious problems. Their participation in class dropped significantly. With the pandemic, families' incomes fell due to economic conditions, and students who were supposed to be at home had to work/earn money,"* indicating that some students had to work and put their education on the back burner.

Findings on inequality of opportunity indicate that students experienced significant disparities in access to educational resources during the distance education period. Student evaluations related to both the pandemic process and the period following the February 6 earthquake reveal that students did not merely passively observe inequalities in education, but also internalized the effects of this injustice, which profoundly impacted their educational processes. Both individual experiences and the observations of other students and teaching staff show that socioeconomic status, technological equipment, and physical environment conditions directly affect students' educational success. This situation is not limited to a lack of technical equipment but has also directly affected participation in the learning process; it has been understood that many students were unable to actively participate in classes, access exams, and fully achieve academic proficiency. Thus, remote education during the pandemic and after the earthquake has created greater inequalities for students with low socioeconomic status.

## Experiences Related to Dialogic Learning in the Distance Education

### Process

The experiences of students and academic staff regarding dialogic learning have focused on the classroom environment, the delivery of lessons, examination and assessment processes, and the provision of competencies. The Two Case Model in Figure 3 shows a comparative view of the experiences of students and academic staff regarding dialogic learning in the distance education process.



**Figure 3. Two-Case Model of Experiences Related to Dialogic Learning in The Distance Education Process**

Students' experiences with distance education reveal that there are numerous factors directly affecting the quality of education during the process. The vast majority of students have assessed the distance education environment as more limited, passive, and non-interactive compared to face-to-face education, lacking opportunities for application; they have emphasized that learning outcomes are not being achieved. The views of teaching staff were similar to those of students, emphasizing that student participation rates in classes were low, motivation was insufficient, a classroom environment was not established, and the lack of interaction meant that classes were not conducted efficiently. Students reported that their level of participation in classes had decreased, that comprehension and deep learning were not sufficiently provided, and that their

communication with teaching staff had weakened. One student (S6) stated, *"There was no direct interaction with the lecturer. The cameras were generally off, and the microphones were often muted. We were just listening, as if it were a YouTube video."* This statement highlights that active participation in the distance education process has become nearly impossible. This situation clearly reveals the lack of dialogue in the delivery of lessons and the absence of a classroom environment. Many students frequently stated that they experienced distractions during the distance education process and that the environment was not sufficiently motivating for learning (e.g., S14: *"It was very difficult to focus on the lecture at home. There were always things that distract me. Sometimes the TV was on, sometimes someone would call out. I didn't feel like I was in class"*).

Lecturers emphasized that student participation rates in classes were quite low and that it had become difficult to interact with those who did participate. In particular, the absence of a classroom environment, the invisibility of students, and the inadequate use of cameras/microphones made the process difficult and completely eliminated dialogic learning. For example, A9 said, *"I am sure that if I had taught my students in a classroom, the attendance and productivity rates would still have been high at 90%. But they couldn't adapt psychologically to online education."* and A2's assessment, *"There were 20-30 students in a class of 70, and we were happy when we reached 50%,"* drew attention to the lack of participation in the course. Again, A9 emphasized that the online classroom cannot replace the real classroom, stating, *"In the classroom environment, when I felt their attention was distracted or they were tired, I could have a little chat and reset them. But this isn't possible in online education because I can't see the students."* A5 emphasized that online classes cannot replace real classes, stating, *"I recommended resources to the students and gave them a database, but one*

*student still asked, 'Professor, where can I find this article?' It struck me as very strange that a third-year student would ask that question."*

Academic staff have stated that students are unable to take sufficient responsibility for their own learning, remain more passive in online environments, and lack self-directed learning skills. For example, A8 stated: *"There was no classroom environment. It's not even comparable. It's much harder to do this remotely. That's why those 1.5 years were a completely lost period for students"* This assessment emphasizes the delivery of lessons and the classroom environment, viewing the distance education process as a loss in terms of student acquisitions. A6 states, *"Our university was completely unprepared for this situation. [...] Discussing how this learning process would not be very productive, we decided to continue our classes via Zoom."* This assessment reveals that they tried to conduct online classes on their own initiative in order to maintain dialogue with students. This situation highlights not only the instructor's search for a classroom environment but also the fact that even the same opportunities were not provided to students at different universities.

Some students have pointed out the inadequacy of course materials and the lack of preparation of teaching staff for this process. Technical infrastructure deficiencies, problems with the use of online platforms, and the unplanned execution of courses have disrupted the learning process. For example, S17 stated, *"Some teachers just opened the slides and read them. There were no additional resources. We couldn't even get answers to our questions. Even the exams were rushed,"* highlighting that the delivery of lessons had turned into a monologue and that the assessment and evaluation processes for the courses were also inadequate. Although a limited number of students mentioned that technology allowed them to access classes from anywhere, highlighting this as an advantage, they also emphasized the inadequacy of a classroom environment

lacking dialogue. For example, S19 stated: *“Some days I didn't go on trips so I wouldn't miss class. But now I can participate from anywhere with an internet connection. That's good in that sense, but the quality of learning was still very low.”*

A significant portion of students, especially in practical courses, have stated that the quality of the learning process has greatly diminished. Students emphasized that in a practice-based field such as tourism guidance, progressing solely with theoretical content and monologues is insufficient and that learning outcomes are not achieved. S9: *“Our field is a practical one. Things like preparing tour programs and guiding techniques are very incomplete when explained on screen. It's difficult to learn without seeing and experiencing.”* It is noteworthy that no student has embraced a learning environment that lacks dialogue. Some teaching staff also stated that conducting practical courses online is inadequate and unconscious. A14: *“We have a guidance practices course; we have a graduation project class. These courses were taught unconsciously. Internships could not be done properly.”* A11: *“We needed to do practical trips to ensure their competence. But you can't do that online. That's why their competence was also affected.”*

Exams and assessment processes have been seen as one of the most problematic areas by both students and academic staff. Academic staff have stated that they cannot ensure the reliability of online exams, that cheating attempts are widespread, and that this leads to unfairness. A9 said, *“We heard that they set up WhatsApp groups and sent each other answers. This was very common.”*

Findings regarding the dialogic learning process show that students experienced significant problems in the learning environment during the distance education process and that academic staff were unable to find solutions to these problems on their own. It would not be wrong to say that lessons cannot be conducted and

assessed effectively on online platforms where a classroom environment does not exist, and that this situation is reflected in learning outcomes.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This study examines the experiences of students and academic staff in tourism guide undergraduate programs regarding distance education implemented in Turkey following the pandemic and the February 2023 earthquake, within the context of critical pedagogy's characteristics of inequality of opportunity and dialogic learning. The research findings reveal that students and lecturers experienced significant problems with internet access, access to technological tools, sharing of these tools within the home, and the working environment at home during the distance education process. Similar results have been obtained in studies conducted on distance education during the pandemic (Arora & Srinivasan, 2020; Chandra, Ranjan & Chowdhary, 2022; Hill, 2020; Keleş, Kurt Dündar & Katırcıoğlu, 2022; Lall & Singh, 2020; Lau, Yang & Dasgupta, 2020) have yielded similar results. In this study, the experiences of both teaching staff and students show that physical and infrastructure problems create inequality of opportunity and hinder dialogic learning.

In addition to access to the internet and technological devices, families' socioeconomic status has been a determining factor in the inequality of opportunity in terms of access to a suitable working environment. At the same time, the inequality of opportunity for students living in the earthquake zone has deepened following the February 2023 earthquake. The findings on inequality in opportunities are consistent with the regional and socioeconomic inequalities in distance education revealed in the study by Ural & Nefayaz (2024). In the current situation, where children from poor families are disadvantaged in school achievement compared to children from wealthy families and structural inequalities are strong (Karatepe & Tunç, 2025), an environment where

structural inequalities are reproduced (Giroux, 1997) has been recreated through the distance education process. Considering the characteristics of critical pedagogy, which is egalitarian and justice-oriented and equates the right to receive an education with the right to life (Ural, 2024), it is clear that the difficulties experienced in accessing distance education during the pandemic and after the earthquake have recreated inequalities. The findings of this study on inequality of opportunity cannot be reduced to a mere descriptive account; rather, they support the Marxist perspective that the education system reproduces class-based inequalities (Hill, 2022). The fact that access to technological resources directly shapes the learning process indicates that distance education is increasingly dependent on market conditions and subject to processes of commodification.

During the distance education period following both the pandemic and the February 2023 earthquake, a formal classroom environment failed to materialize in online classes, leading to reduced student participation; lessons devolved into monologues lacking mutual interaction. Furthermore, the assessment and evaluation processes of these lessons were ineffective, and program competencies were not achieved. The most concrete fact that brought about this situation is the failure of dialogic learning. This result is also consistent with the work of Rahimi & Asadi (2014), which emphasizes the importance of communication-based learning. Freire (2008) states that learning cannot be reduced to the mere transfer of knowledge, but gains meaning through mutual interaction, questioning, and meaning production. Mortimer & Scott (2003) also state that conversation/dialogue is at the center of learning. Freire (2021a) sees dialogue as an existential necessity that both teacher and student direct toward a world that is to be transformed and humanized through their thoughts and actions. The structure of dialogue should be loving, humble, hopeful, and trusting (Freire, 2021b). The dialogic learning process has a more positive effect

on students' critical thinking skills (Frijters, Dam & Rijlaarsdam, 2008). The distance that arises in a learning environment without dialogue is not a simple physical distance (Freire, 2019). Research results also show that the distance that arises is much more than a physical distance.

Freire (2008) defined the “banking concept of education,” which assigns students the passive role of information recipients, and this approach has been reproduced during the pandemic. In fact, Freire (2008) describes the student in the banking concept of education as a container to be filled by instructors. It is unclear whether this bucket exists in distance education during the pandemic. Turned-off cameras, lack of feedback, and absence of classroom dynamics indicate that rote teaching and an exclusionary structure (Kesik & Bayram, 2015) have been adopted, weakening the student's process of becoming a subject.

Critical pedagogy aims to create a learning environment where the relationship between theory and practice, critical analysis and common sense, learning and social transformation can be effectively questioned and discussed (Giroux, 1997). However, such an environment has not been established in the distance education process, leading to significant problems in terms of equality and dialogic learning. Students have not had equal conditions in education, and academic staff have been unable to establish a learning partnership with students. Consequently, the transformative role attributed to critical pedagogy has not materialized in practice. Despite these adverse conditions, students’ recognition of the inequalities experienced by others—and their interpretation of these inequalities as structural rather than merely technical—may be understood as indicative of an emerging class consciousness in the Marxist sense, aligning with Freire (2008)’s conceptualization of critical consciousness (conscientization).

Even in the current situation, in the neoliberal era where economic and social disadvantages stemming from poverty are labeled as failure (Spring, 2017), education that is not equally accessible to everyone due to distance education cannot be considered a real education. Education should not become a tool that deepens social inequalities and injustices; on the contrary, it should serve a transformative function that eliminates these inequalities. An educational process without dialogue cannot develop or transform students. Therefore, education should not be merely a transfer of knowledge, but a process of liberation shaped on the basis of equality and mutual interaction (Apple, 2004; Freire, 2008; Giroux, 2011). The findings of this study on inequality of opportunity go well beyond a simple descriptive account; rather, they highlight how the education system continues to reproduce class-based inequalities in line with Marxist critiques (Hill, 2022). What becomes particularly striking is the extent to which access to technological resources shapes students' learning experiences. From this perspective, distance education can no longer be understood as a neutral pedagogical arrangement. Instead, it appears increasingly shaped by market-oriented dynamics, through which education is gradually transformed into a commodified practice.

The tourism guidance education is, by its very nature, based not only on the transfer of theoretical knowledge but also on practical learning processes and a structure based on strong interaction. In this context, dialogic learning plays a central role in both developing professional skills and supporting critical thinking. However, the monologue-based structure of distance education has eliminated this interaction. Furthermore, tourism guidance education, which currently harbors inequalities of opportunity in areas such as field trips, access to materials, and technological equipment, has reproduced these inequalities during the pandemic and earthquake period.

In situations where distance education has become a compulsory education process under mandatory conditions, such as the one during the pandemic, the most important issues for critical pedagogy can be considered to be the creation of a classroom environment that supports dialogic learning, in addition to access opportunities that eliminate inequality of opportunity. Furthermore, since the right to education is the right of every individual (Altunya, 2023; Ural, 2024), distance access in mandatory cases should be designed within the scope of the right to education. Neoliberal policies tend to deepen inequalities by gradually weakening public services (Hill, 2019). When education is no longer recognized as a public good, the solutions proposed are unlikely to move beyond short-term and temporary fixes. As education gradually loses its public character, it becomes increasingly shaped by the individualizing logic of neoliberalism. In turn, existing class inequalities are not only reproduced, but further deepened. In contexts such as Turkey, where distance education is imposed as a compulsory mode during crises such as earthquakes and disasters, access to the internet and digital devices becomes a fundamental concern. In this sense, it should be understood not as a privilege, but as a public right. Likewise, establishing minimum standards to sustain dialogic learning is not only a pedagogical concern, but also a political necessity. Such measures are essential to safeguard the public right to education for disadvantaged groups. Otherwise, distance education risks becoming a structure that deepens and legitimizes the inequalities produced by neoliberalism. In this context, ongoing debates about the expanding role of distance education make it necessary to critically reconsider the political economy underlying this transformation. This is because the shift toward distance education reflects a policy orientation aligned with neoliberal priorities, privileging cost reduction and increased flexibility over the creation of equal educational conditions.

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