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Ethical Challenges of School Principals during of COVID-19

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Abstract

Background: Today, societies pay attention to ethics and moral values, emphasizing that moral values should be preserved and kept alive in educational organizations. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to identify the ethical challenges of schools' principal in the Corona period.
Methods: The present study was applied in terms of purpose and qualitative in terms of method. Its statistical population included educational management professors and schools' principal of West Azerbaijan Province. Sampling was done systematically through snowball technique and based on theoretical saturation criterion. Research data was collected by reviewing 21 articles related to the ethics of educational management or educational leadership in the COVID 19 period and then through semi-structured interviews (17 people) based on the model of qualitative interviews and its criteria, in an approximate. Data were categorized using thematic analysis method in the form of basic, organized and comprehensive themes.
Results: The results showed that the ethical challenges of schools' principal in Corona period as a comprehensive theme included 98 basic themes. According to the classification of basic themes, 7 organizing themes, including professional ethics, social-communicative ethics, individual ethics, technical-educational ethics, spiritual ethics, behavioral ethics, and decision-making ethics were obtained**.**
Conclusion: The results showed that the closure of schools under COVID exacerbated 19 ethical problems in the education policies and practices, creating moral challenges in them. In this regard, principals are expected to use their knowledge and ethical skills to improve their scientific knowledge to address the problem of students at school during the Corona epidemic.

Keyword: Principals 'ethics, COVID 19, Professional ethics, Educational ethics

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Introduction

The coronavirus epidemic (COVID 19) and the resulting disease are now affecting all aspects of daily life around the world; in particular, since January 2020, it has caused a sudden global public health crisis, which soon spread from the city of Wuhan in China to the rest of the world and became a serious threat to humans (1). According to the center of the disease control, this has been one of the most important and unpredictable global public health crises in recent times (2) and has posed a major challenge to the global village due to its high transmissibility, near proximity and invisibility (3). The confirmed death rate till January 12, 2, 2021 was equal to 1,952,879 people in the world and 56262 people in Iran. However, Corona disease has not yet been controlled and the death toll is still rising. In other words, the world is facing the worst pandemic in the century.

Governments and public health systems have taken extensive measures to prevent the outbreak of the disease by declaring a state of emergency; but, the stress of this disease and its devastating psychosocial effects have severely affected society in every field, especially in education (4). In other words, the disease has plunged the global economy into crisis, has shaken the society, and has completely changed the way education is conducted. COVID 19 has imposed restrictions on the public life that were unimaginable a year ago. Teaching and learning methods and the core functions of schools have changed dramatically and education administrators have come under much pressure. In the short term, the influence of COVID 19 has changed the methods of education and learning in a strange and huge way (5). About 1.6 billion young people did not go to school during the epidemic, and typically every country has a drop in education. It can be said that "almost all schools have been closed and teaching has been reorganized in various ways "(6).

The schools' principal faces a lot of pressure in these difficult conditions as well (5). In this situation, the behavior and ethics of school principals have a very important role in their leadership, establishing effective relationships with students and school staff (7). The schools' principal is a leader who takes care of reaching educational goals, maintaining the continuity of the institution and providing a positive climate at school. The school principal has official authorities. The use of these formal powers, along with social and technical powers, ensures that they are accepted as leaders by other members of the school (8). At this stage, it can be said that the ethical behaviors of the school principal as a leader in management processes are important.

Educational environments play a serious role in educating individuals and the growth and development of the society (9) and since the principals of the organizations and schools face many ethical issues as legal entities in their organizational life, one of their constant concerns in all organizations and schools is how to apply the management methods effectively and efficiently (10). In the current context, despite the lack of research on how school leaders respond to the Corona virus epidemic, there are some new insights into leadership and management in the Corona period´s educational environment. The school leadership has shifted its focus and is unlikely to return to the "normal" status soon. Research emphasizes that the principles of good leadership are having a clear vision, developing others, managing people, building capacity, and etc. (11). This evidence also points to the importance of responsible leadership, which suggests a change in school leadership practices due to COVID 19 (12). On the other hand, the principal must create a healthy atmosphere for the teaching staff and students. This requires managers with high professional ethics (13). Principals' professional ethics affect teachers' job motivation (14) so any improvement in school ethics can be accompanied by improving the sense of belonging to school and academic achievements (15).

Ethics is a systematic knowledge that determines the patterns of communication behavior of individuals and organizations towards themselves and others based on respect for the rights of both parties in the relationship. Ethics and moral values have an irreplaceable role in the studying and knowledge

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since they play a significant role in the development of behaviors and final decisions (16). In fact, educational administrators not only have to have a clear philosophy and moral assumptions, but also need to provide a way by promoting ethical actions and behaviors and provide solutions to all teachers, students, and even parents (17). In addition, principals are the moral models of the school. The way students behave largely depends on the behavior of the principals (18). The moral leader derives his leadership power from moral principles. A moral leader acts on the basis of moral principles. He/she internalizes ethical values in the decisions and at the same time is fair, respectful, tolerant, honest, and positive and also gains the trust of employees (19, 20).

Ethics helps educators move from bureaucratic and control systems to the teacher empowerment and participatory decision makings (21). Ethical action of managers means performing their duties and shaping the ethical contexts of the groups, organizations, and their communities (22). In this regard, a researcher has stated that ethical principles should play a key role in the principals' decisions (23). It is also one of the duties of educational administrators to create an environment in which ethical educational programs are implemented and schools prepare the people in principle to accept social responsibilities and become moral (24). In general, under normal circumstances, some ethical challenges for school principals include poor communication at schools, lack of trust, and lack of a respectful work environment (17).

School principals, like leaders in other fields, can have a variety of successes that may be influenced by their leadership abilities and ethical behaviors (25). Examining the studies, it can be said that the moral characteristics of school principals are related to many concepts. For example, researchers have found that the ethical leadership style of the Corona period was effective in developing student learning (26). Another work has referred to the characteristics of educational leaders in the Corona period with the indicators such as credible leadership, having vision, personally developed, and high capacity (27). Another researcher has considered the moral characteristics of school principals as tolerance, justice-oriented, responsible, honest, democratic and respectful (28). One study (29) considered the ethical role of principals in school development to be important. Another study (25) showed that there is a significant (and expected) relationship between the general leadership abilities of school principals and their ethical behaviors. According to other researchers, the ethical behaviors of school principals promote organizational health at school. That is, by increasing the ethical behaviors of school principals, the organizational health of the school increases positively (8). Other research findings show that the quality, quantity and frequency of top-down communication have contributed to the school leaders´ stress, while horizontal communication and cooperation between school principals have helped leaders in times of rapid change (30). According to another researcher, the challenges facing educational administrators and leaders during the Corona period include preparing students and teachers for online teaching and learning for an indefinite period of time, supporting the well-being of students and staff, and establishing open and compassionate communication with all stakeholders. This period has highlighted a number of implications for crisis leadership, such as preparation, effective communication, participatory leadership, and the use of opportunities (31). By summarizing the studies, the understanding of the ethics of school principals can be developed, justified, and strengthened with ethical connections and themes related to transformational leadership, genuine leadership and trust in leaders. On the other hand, developing the moral characteristics of principals is essential for the success of educational institutions and ethical principles reflect values such as honesty, fairness, justice, social justice, and respect for others.

In the past year, school principals have been required to effectively manage the education crisis while they have experienced many problems and identified some opportunities (31). Thus, in this difficult period of the Corona epidemic in which humanity is forced to face many unusual challenges, the issue of school leadership and management is

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of particular importance (32). In stating the problem of research, it can be said that despite the change in the nature of the work of principals, which, like the work of teachers, is largely influenced by the growing role of neoliberal principles and policies in education and still continues to be affected, the general nature of school leadership is to support students, families, and all actors involved in school affairs, as well as meeting the needs of the community the schools serve (30). Also, in the current conditions which is fraught with uncertainty, chaos, and change, there is more and more pressure on the leaders to stay in their role and succeed; but, in the meantime, new problems such as improper plan of course arrangements, improper resource management, lack of attention and proper communication with learners, overall poor quality of training, and abusing others´ rights have been followed among educational changes in Corona period; so, a manager must remove existing barriers based on his moral competencies to play an effective role in developing and ensuring the quality of education. Although e-learning has created dramatic changes in education, it has also led to the new issues in ethics and accountability. Thus, this study aimed to answer the question of "what are the ethical challenges for school principals in the Corona period?

Material & Methods

This research was qualitative and in terms of philosophical foundations, it was in the group of pragmatism paradigm but in terms of purpose, it was applied-developmental, using content analysis in a qualitative exploratory method (analysis of interviews and written documents). The statistical population included high-ranking university professors of educational management and school principals in West Azerbaijan Province. Sampling was done systematically using snowball technique until the theoretical saturation was reached. The criteria for entering the samples was at least a master's degree and a teaching or management profile of more than 5 years in their field of specialization. Finally, 17 people participated in the present study. Research data were collected by reviewing 21 articles related to the ethics of educational management or educational leadership in the COVID period 19 period and through semi-structured interviews based on the model of qualitative interviews and observing its criteria for approximately 25 to 45 minutes conducted in person, electronically, and by telephone. In order to analyze the research data, the content analysis method was used to analyze the semi-structured interviews. Content analysis technique is a process that converts discrete and complete information into rich and detailed data (33). Among the four methods of content analysis, namely (A: thematic format, B: thematic matrix, C: thematic network D: comparative analysis) in this research, a thematic network analysis method was used. Thematic network analysis can be broadly divided into three main sections: first, text reduction, second, text exploration, and third, integration of exploration.

Assessing the scientific accuracy of qualitative studies includes four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (34). In this regard, for assessing credibility, sampling until the data reached saturation, long-term involvement in the field and multi lateralization of data, and in general all processes and steps were performed in the research; also, for testing credibility, inspection, researcher documentation of data, methods, decisions and multilateralism were conducted. For credibility, data alignment methods were performed by collecting sufficient data from various sources such as experts, scientific and research sources and documents, theoretical and research backgrounds, researcher self-review and control of members participating in the research. In terms of transferability, a detailed description of the environment and participants and the diversity of views and experiences of the interviewees were provided.

Results

In the first step, related research articles were studied and then the transcripts were studied and reviewed many times; by combining these two methods, a list of basic codes or basic themes was created. By re-examining and refining the themes fur-

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ther, we tried to make the themes sufficient, specific, separate, non-repetitive, and macro to include the set of ideas presented in some parts of the text. This reduced the data and became a collection of important organizing themes. Also, 98 basic themes, including 71 themes were extracted from the library method and 27 themes were obtained from interviews. In the next steps, the obtained themes were classified into similar and coherent groups and the content network was analyzed and reviewed several times. Finally, for the sociological lesions of COVID 19 disease as the global themes, 7 organizing themes, and 95 basic themes were identified and a thematic network was extracted.

Table 1: Basic, organizing and global themes

Global	Organizing	Basic
Ethical challenges of school principals in Corona period	Professional ethics	Further efforts in the corona pandemic, moral and professional knowledge and literacy, law-orientation sight, maturity and moral competence, observance of health principles, maintaining students' health, providing psychological security for educational stakeholders, reducing stress and strain, spreading values and ethical issues in the pandemic, respect for privacy, academic competence and well-being, responding to the needs of students, rebuilding students' emotional and social health, responsibility and conscientiousness towards students and parents, reducing students boredom, individual commitment to students and parents, giving hope to students, respecting students' rights
	Social-communication ethics	Active listener of problems, trust in colleagues, verbal sobriety, behavioral sobriety, non-biased attitudes, reflection of social values, respect for family values, empathy between school members and students, honest communication, increasing community resilience, attention and proper communication with learners , relationships with teachers and teaching staff, cooperation with parents
	Individual ethics	Self-management, seriousness and perseverance, personal adjustment, emotional health, self-knowledge, ability to thinking, interpreting and analyzing situations, moral motivation, realist, correct moral insight, benevolent, committed, morality in personal life
	Educational technical ethics	Agility and innovation in using the new educational method, ethical strategy for the development of e-learning, intelligence and using e-learning opportunity, development of e-learning capacities, use of norms in educational concepts, attention to needs, preservation and dissemination of values in education, prevention from academic failure, continuous presence in educational work, continuous improvement of the e-learning quality, evaluation of ethical performance of teaching staff, improvement of assessment and e-learning skills, development of software skills, transformative, supportive, guiding, attention to student participation, attention to students´ order
	Spiritual ethics	Ability to sacrifice and forgiveness, commitment and compassion, avoiding grudges, faith in God and godliness, piety and sincerity, conscience, helping, fear of God, honesty and truthfulness, gratitude, respect for human dignity, insistence on right action
	Behavioral ethics	Criticism and participation in problem solving, patience , tolerance with inexperienced teachers, politeness, humility, and kindness, devoting more time to promoting e-learning, flexibility and avoidance of self-centeredness, motivation and ethics of solidarity, courage and self-sacrifice spirit, moderation and non-excess in work, good behavior and tolerance
	Ethics of decision making	Observance of fairness in decision-making, risk-taking, appropriate moral action, avoidance of utilitarianism, non-abuse of managerial position, increasing the speed of handling problems, rational and methodical approach in the face of quarantine problems, resolving moral conflicts and deviations, central educational justice, assertiveness, autonomy, lack of taste-based decisions, moral transparency, moral leadership, moral choice

Based on the mentioned framework and research product and according to the classification of basic themes and knowledge of an abstract theme, 7 organizing themes including professional ethics, social-communication ethics, individual ethics, technical-educational ethics, spiritual ethics, behavioral ethics and decision-making ethics were obtained. In summary, the thematic network related to the

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ethical challenges of school principals during the Corona period is shown in Figure (1).

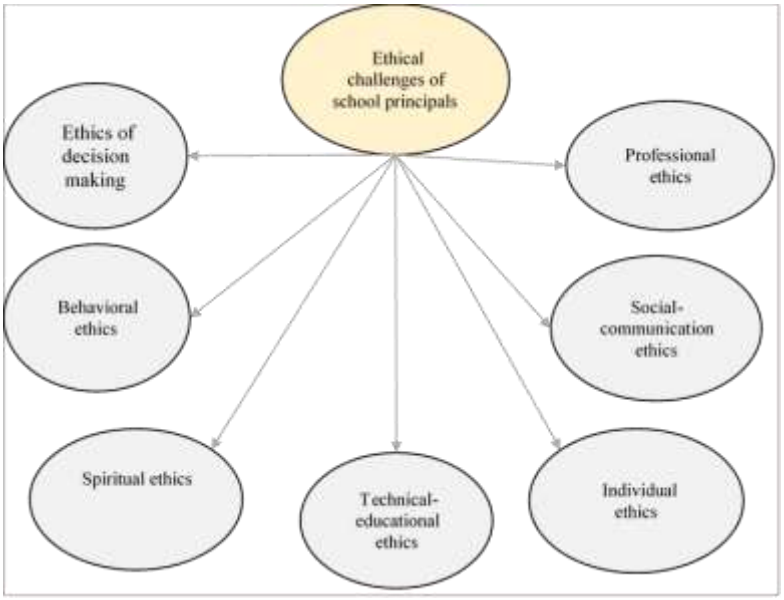

Fig. 1: Thematic network of ethical challenges for the schools' principal in the Corona period

Table (2) specifies which of the identified themes is mentioned in each research. Also, in this table, to summarize the results of the next tables, each theme was marked with an English letter.

Table 2: Alignment of identified themes with research backgrounds

Organizing themes	Open code No	Theoretical and empirical evidence
Professional ethics	18	(12,10)
Social-communication ethics	13	(11)
Individual ethics	12	(12,2)
Technical-educational ethic	18	(20,19)
Spiritual ethics	12	(16)
Behavioral ethics	10	(25)
Ethics of decision making	15	(6,5)

Discussion

The analysis results of this study indicated that professional ethics, social-communication ethics, individual ethics, technical-educational ethics, spiritual ethics, behavioral ethics and decision-making ethics can be the challenges that school principals face during the Corona pandemic. For example, the lack of social ethics skills of school principals can also cause ethical challenges for organizations. Because, when they look at things only from their own view without understanding others, they are less aware of the consequences of their actions on those people's lives. This situation can lead to the great risks of creating unethical actions in the field of education, including when an educational principal realizes the immoral consequences of his decisions that he/she has not thought about or paid enough attention to before. He/she can understand that this factor can cause great and irreparable damages to students, teachers or society as a whole. Because, the lack of effective social interactions (social-communication ethics) of the principals with others prevents the understanding of their feelings, views, their inner experiences. The findings of this study are in line with the results of a research in which it was stated that educational principals and leaders create a good moral atmosphere at school with a view to transformational leadership, helping the students'

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academic achievements (13). But, when a principal lacks a clear and sufficient understanding of the consequences of his decisions and actions for others, he will destroy the organization. Considering that decision making is the process of facing a problem, turning the problem into an issue, and solving it effectively, trying to organize the organization is one of the moral responsibilities of the principals not only in the Corona period, but also in all times; because, systematization prevents tasteful, occasional, and discriminatory decisions. In the meantime, having a comprehensive training system distributes training opportunities fairly and increases training productivity in order to respond to the needs and eliminate educational gaps in the organization. After all, when an educational principal works with ethical leaders based on ethical principles and internalizes ethical values in its decisions and adheres to the ethics of decision-making, the findings are in line with the results of the researchers who stated in their research that today, educational leaders are better to involve employees in their own decisions and also make them accountable so that they can make appropriate decisions tailored to their needs at school (5, 6). While respecting the ethics of decision-making and at the same time keeping in mind their individual ethics, by showing courageous, humble, adaptable, and empathetic behaviors and strengthening mutual relations and institutionalizing trust between them, the people, and employees in the crisis situations, these people provide opportunities for counseling and interviews with the people and can establish mutual relations to align them with their goals so that they can fully overcome the critical conditions in an ideal way. The results of this finding are consistent with the field of behavioral ethics and the researcher who concluded that the ethical behavior skills of the principals play an important role in the teachers' effective leadership at school (25). On the other hand, from the view of personal ethics of principals in the Corona crisis, it can be said that someone who is not confidential and trustworthy in his personal life becomes careless about the confidentiality and trustworthiness of the school affairs as well, which is even more complex. Besides, personal ethics of the principals promotes morality in school culture while their immoral behaviors in personal life increase anti-morality at schools. With the sensitivity and high coverage of news and currents due to the widespread use of social networks, principals are more exposed to the public eye and their individual ethics is considered as a model for many people. Justice is one of the central slogans of any ethical school. When the members of a school feel that the system is justice-oriented, there is a greater sense of cooperation between the members and principal. Regarding spiritual ethics, it can be said that a principal who adheres to the ideological moral values is less distracted due to the fact that he uses a correct way of thinking, is less divert, and exhibits behaviors that meet required expectations. Considering the theory of social norms and following that the environments in which schools are located, it seems that principals in their decisions are more in line with social norms and as a result are accepted by their community. In the crisis situations such as the Corona period, they are more widely accepted; so, they face fewer obstacles in performing their duties and achieving their goals. The results of this study are in line with the research findings in which the spirituality and spiritual beliefs of principals were effective in performing their professional roles (16).

In addition, professional ethics had a significant impact on the activities and expected results of schools. Principals' professional ethics increase school productivity, improve communication, and reduce risk. It also provides a healthy atmosphere for the teaching staff and students, improves the sense of belonging in them and students, leading to their academic progress. The findings are consistent with the research in which the role of professional ethics of principals at schools was decisive (11, 12). This research, like other descriptive research, had some limitations. For example, the interviewees were not sometimes willing to be interviewed; also, time and space constraints were other limitations of this research. In order to make the findings of this research applied, an ethical code is proposed for the school principals that should be prepared with the participation of all stakeholders. Another suggestion is that ethical

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guidelines are adopted to decide for the school affairs, some mechanisms should be developed to resolve ethical issues, awareness and sensitivity to ethical issues should be increased, and a plan should be developed to assess ethical needs in schools and during the Corona epidemic.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that the closure of schools under COVID 19 exacerbated existing ethical problems in the educational policies and practices but has not generally created new ethical challenges or the nature of existing ethical challenges for school principals; but, if moral obligations are not considered, they will induce the dangers that will lead to the students' academic failure and consequent educational decline. This research provides a framework for analyzing the ethical competencies and ethical problems of educational principals as well as practical advices for school leaders, researchers, and policymakers to improve their educational leadership.
Based on the results of this study, principals are expected to promote not only their scientific skills and knowledge to meet and remove the students' needs and problems at school during Corona pandemic, but also use their ethical skills and knowledge for this purpose.

Ethical Consideration

In this research, the ethics of scientific fidelity has been observed and the copyright of the used works has been respected by introducing the used sources. Also, in conducting the research, by observing the used method step by step, complying with the used method has been considered completely**.**

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