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## CURRICULUM REFORM AND TEACHER AUTONOMY IN TURKEY: THE CASE OF THE HISTORY TEACHING

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*In recent years, the curriculum programs have been changed dramatically in Turkey, as part of a comprehensive reform initiative. The history curriculum for secondary schools was subjected to this transformation as well. This study examines the curriculum reform in terms of teacher autonomy, a key-concept for the comprehension and improvement of the teachers' role in education. The study aims to analyze whether the change in the curriculum has brought any significant innovation regarding the teacher autonomy. According to study's findings, the new history curriculum fails to construct a new framework that is able to provide to teachers a broad sphere of power and autonomy which could allow and encourage them to assume a greater role in the curriculum planning and implementation. This situation is evidently in contradiction with the main reform's goals such as the development of student-centered teaching methods focusing on the needs, interests and demands of the students and considering their diversities.*

Key Words: teacher autonomy, curriculum reform, history teaching, Turkey

### INTRODUCTION

The elementary and secondary school curriculum has undergone a dramatic change in Turkey in 2000s. The curriculum reform was first introduced in the elementary school level in 2004; during the years that followed, the curriculum programs of most courses were renewed both in elementary and general secondary education.

One major factor that provoked the policy makers to execute such a comprehensive reform initiative is the fairly pessimistic sketch on the overall quality of Turkish education system outlined in international assessment programs including PISA and PIRLS (Akşit, 2007; MoNE, n.d.). The said assessment programs rank Turkey at the bottom on the lists focusing on the

OECD and EU countries. Another factor behind the momentum to introduce bold and ambitious reforms in the field of education in Turkey is the overall reformist tendency observed in the government policies to facilitate accession to the EU. In early 2000s, the government introduced reforms to harmonize the national legislations with the EU body law. This has been the case with the field of education as well (Akşit, 2007).

Even though there are significant differences in the new curriculum programs according to their teaching subject, the programs also display some common features and characteristics. Overall, the major approaches and goals of the new programs are as follows (ERG, 2005; MoNE, n.d.) :

- Greater focus on student-centered teaching activities instead of subject-centered and teacher-centered approaches;
- Encouraging the learning by research and self-experience;
- Improving the diversity in the teaching methods and materials;
- Ensuring the enhancement of the students' skills rather than mere transmission of information;
- Improving the interaction and cooperation between the students in the process of teaching and learning;
- Use of more effective assessment methods and tools;
- Improving the use of information and communication technologies in teaching and learning activities.

The curriculum reform was mostly welcomed by the teachers, education scholars and the general public. However, the reform was not free of critics. The criticisms mostly focus on the implementation of the reform. The researches done so far show that lack of material support and training opportunities for the teachers, scarce sources and materials, poor technological infrastructure and physical facilities are the major obstacles before the attainment of the goals spelled out in the reform (Bulut, 2007; Kırkgöz, 2008; Korkmaz, 2008; Öztürk, 2009a). Critics also argue that the participation and involvement of civil society actors and the universities in the preparation of the curriculum programs and the pilot cases has been fairly limited (Akşit, 2007).

### **Teacher Autonomy and Teaching Development**

The importance of the professional autonomy in the enhancement of the teachers' role in education has been underlined in a number of scholarly works (e.g. Castle, 2004; Friedman, 1999; Ingersoll, 2007; Pearson and Moomaw, 2006; Webb, 2002; White, 1992). It is argued that organizational efficiency

may be further improved via enhancement and enlargement of the professional autonomy of the employees and recognition of further authorities for the staff in the decision-making process that allows them to act and think more freely. Organizations where the sphere of decision making is open to senior managers only are less effective than are organizations in which decision making is decentralized (Friedman, 1999). Enhancement of the teachers' professional autonomy is something that needs to be considered in the implementation of the education reforms. Granting autonomy and empowering teachers can be an appropriate starting point to deal with the current school problems (Pearson and Moomaw, 2006).

In the scientific literature, the concept of the teacher autonomy is defined by many scholars and these definitions contain important differences. Therefore it's very difficult to find a common definition. However, these different definitions point to one common aspect which stresses that the autonomy requires recognition of greater power and freedom to the teachers in their professional activities. Scholars describe this as "control their work environment" (Pearson and Hall, 1993:173), "encouraging and strengthening the power of teachers" (Friedman, 1999:60), or "freedom to make certain decisions" (Short, 1994:490-491).

As observed with other professions that require specialization, improvement of teacher autonomy envisage the enhancement of the teacher powers in processes of planning, decision making and materialization of the educational activities (Pearson and Moomaw, 2006). However, it should be recalled that teacher autonomy does not mean absolute freedom. Studies done so far on this subject show that excessive authority recognized to the teachers lead to other problems and undesired outcomes (Anderson, 1987). Recognition of further powers for the teachers in their professional activities is done by not only the upper authorities who regulate the framework of these powers but also enhancement of the professional capacities and skills of the teachers (Bustingorry, 2008; Steh and Pozarnik, 2005).

Enhancement of teacher autonomy bears significance in many respects. Above all, recognition of greater powers for the teachers is essential to ensure that they fulfill their tasks at the schools properly. The limited power of the teachers in the drafting and planning of the teaching methods and contents contradicts with the larger sphere of their responsibilities. Ingersoll (2007) states that teachers are entrusted with the training of the next generation, but they are often not

entrusted with much control over many of the key decisions concerned with this crucial work.

The literature focuses on the impact of professional autonomy over the professional quality of the teachers' work. Goodlad et al. (as cited in Webb, 2002) argue that there are three characteristics for someone to qualify as a professional: Professionals must possess a large degree of talent and skill in their profession; they must use a body of knowledge that supports their work; and they must have the autonomy to make decisions in their work. Freidson (as cited in Ingersoll, 2007) argues that the degree of power and control that employees hold over workplace decisions is one of the most important factor determining the degree of professionalization and the status of an occupation. Professional autonomy should be secured for the teachers to make sure that they are recognized as professionals:

[...] recognizing teaching as a profession and developing professional teachers is a possible solution to teachers' lack of motivation and satisfaction, professionalism, and empowerment, as well as teacher stress. If teachers are to be empowered and regarded as professionals, then, like other professionals, they must have the freedom to prescribe the best treatment for their students (as doctors and lawyers do for their patients and clients). Experts have defined that freedom as *teacher autonomy* (Pearson and Moomaw, 2006:44).

Teacher autonomy is a must in teaching because of some unique aspects and requirements of this profession. The abilities of the students to grasp any given subject, their needs, interests and tendencies as well as their skills and talents are all different. The environment and outlook of any given class is different from those of another. Therefore, it is the teacher who knows the classroom reality best and is able to make the best and most sound decisions with respect to the pupils (ETUCE, 2008).

Piagetian constructivist approach refers to pupils' autonomy as an important purpose of education. In classrooms where teachers encourage autonomy, children turn into problem solvers, capable not only of properly dealing with the problems, but also of posing their own problems to solve or questions to explore (Castle, 2004). However, in order that the teacher encourages learning autonomy of the pupils and plans the teaching activities based on the needs, natures and features of those students, they should possess some degree of autonomy. Castle (2004:7) states that "teacher autonomy will equip teachers to

be curriculum creators not just curriculum enactors. Autonomous teachers co-create curriculum with children. They help children become more autonomous through pursuing topics and questions of interest to children themselves.”

Teacher autonomy is a broad concept; it refers not only to the teacher’s power in the planning and implementing of the teaching activities but also to his or her involvement and participation in the decision making process at the level of school management. Friedman (1999) states that there are two main aspects of teacher autonomy: the *pedagogical aspect* that focuses on such issues as curriculum development and student teaching and assessment, and *organizational aspect* that focuses on such issues as staff development or budget planning.

The term teacher autonomy, however, is analyzed in this study in a narrower sense because it mainly focuses on the curriculum. The organizational aspect falls outside of the scope of this research. Therefore, the term teacher autonomy -as used in this article- points to the power and freedom of the teachers in the selection of the subjects to be taught, methods and materials to be used in the teaching activities as well as the implementation of the decisions taken.

### **Teacher Autonomy in Turkish Educational System**

Turkish educational system has been under the influence of centralist tendencies throughout the process of its historical development in modern era; this is still the case in the present time (Uygun, 2008). According to Fretwell and Wheeler (as cited in Akşit, 2007), Turkey has the most centralized education system among the OECD member states. This centralized structure is visibly observed in many fields of the education system including curriculum development, approval and choice of textbooks and other instructional materials, employment of teachers, governance and inspection of schools, appointment and in-service training of teachers (Yıldırım, 2003). This limits the powers and autonomy of the schools in the decision making and management processes. “Compared with Europe and most of the world, Turkey’s public schools have the least autonomy over resources, staff deployment (at the school), textbook selection, allocation of instructional time, and selection of programs offered” (Vorkink, 2006:17). The curriculum programs drafted by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) envisage a standard system for the entire country. The number of optional and elective courses is fairly limited in this system. In addition, the electives must be picked from a list prepared by the Ministry (ERG, 2008).

Yıldırım (2003) analyzes the attitudes and practices of Turkish teachers with regard to instructional planning and further concludes that external factors have played vital roles in the decisions with respect to the teaching activities. Curriculum programs and textbooks appear to be the most influential tools in the process of instructional planning. In other words, the teachers excessively rely on the curriculum and the textbooks in their teaching activities. The school administration and the inspectors ask full implementation of the curriculum programs by the teachers. In short, the teachers have little autonomy in the determination of the content of the teaching activities. In cases where the curriculum falls short to meet the demands, interests and needs of the students, the teachers have difficulties to run their teaching activities in accordance with the class reality:

[...] the most common problem mentioned by the teachers was the difficulty they experienced in bridging the gap between the requirements of the national curriculum and the realities of the classroom. They stated that certain units in the national curriculum may not be in line with students' background, needs and interests; as a result, what they planned in units may not be achieved fully during instruction. Teachers mentioned that principals and inspectors often would like to see that unit plans reflected the national curriculum as much as possible, resulting a dilemma for teachers in preparing unit plans. (Yıldırım, 2003:533)

Current researches confirm that the teachers are mostly complainant about the intense content of the curriculum programs (Can, 2009). This situation points to two different outcomes: that the contents of the programs are very detailed and intense; for this reason, the teachers do not have flexibility to regulate the contents of the programs in accordance with the special needs and circumstances of the class. Secondly, the teachers feel that they are obligated to follow the programs through the end of the year and leave any uncovered subject included in the program.

This structure of the educational system effect naturally the teachers' attitudes and practices in regards to curriculum development and planning. Can (2009) shows that, in Turkey most teachers hold that they have not the curriculum development task, as the programs are developed by the National Ministry of Education.

## METHOD

The recent curriculum reform emerged as an ambitious initiative to resolve the issue of poor quality in educational system in Turkey. The best way to address this challenge is proper diagnosis of the fundamental problems and introduction of adequate resolutions to cope with these problems. To this end, the lack of teacher autonomy is an issue that needs to be carefully considered.

The curriculum reform's goals require undoubtedly a greater involvement of the teachers in the process of teaching development. To this end, the teachers need more autonomy and freedom for adapting their lessons to the needs, interests and demands of their students. But the low degree of autonomy allowed to teachers in their professional activities is one of the longstanding features of the Turkish educational system. It's clear that this incompatibility between the goals of the curriculum reform and the structure of the educational system where the Ministry exercises a strict control over the school curriculum is one of the biggest challenges for the Turkish policy makers.

This study aims to analyze, through the new secondary history curriculum, whether and how the program makers deal with this crucial problem. Therefore, we intend to observe how the structure that gives the priority to curriculum control evolves in the new curriculum programs. In others words, this article aims to explore whether the new history curriculum will be able to adequately address the lack of teacher autonomy that plays a crucial role in teaching development.

The primary resources of this study are the former and new curriculum programs of history courses (MoNE, 1981; 1993; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009). The content of the curriculum programs are analyzed based on qualitative research designs in line with the goals of the research. The content analysis focus basically on three different aspects in curriculum programs :

- Place of the teacher autonomy in overall goals and principles of the programs;
- Sphere of freedom allowed to teachers in the teaching content (subjects) planning;

Sphere of freedom allowed to teachers in the teaching methods and activities planning.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Change and Challenges in History Curriculum

History is not a separate course in elementary school curriculum in Turkey. In this level, subjects of the history, geography and civic education are taught together in the course of the *Social Studies*. Conversely, history is taught separately in secondary school level. This study analyzes the syllabi of compulsory history courses in secondary education.

The secondary history curriculum change was started in 2007. Four new history programs (*History for 9<sup>th</sup> grade*, *History for 10<sup>th</sup> grade*, *History for 11<sup>th</sup> grade* and *Contemporary Turkish and world history*) were prepared between 2007 and 2010. The new curriculum programs offer significant changes and innovations in the teaching of history courses. The program notes that the leading goal of the change is enhancement of “student-centered learning”. To this end, the official texts further recall that teaching activities should be carried out with the understanding that every student is a different and independent individual, and that different students with diverse background and learning abilities have different needs and require varying attentions. Under this approach, the history program urges the teacher to consider diversity in the learning and teaching methods and employ the proper method that suits to the students (MoNE, 2007; 2008a).

Yet another innovation in the new history curriculum program with respect to student-centered approach is its emphasis upon active participation and involvement of the pupils in the teaching activities. In so doing, the drafters of the program seek to make sure that the students assume active roles in the learning process (MoNE, 2007). The prevalent method in history classes in Turkey is traditional narrative method which pays central attention to the teacher. The new curriculum aims to introduce teaching methods focusing on student-centered learning activities instead of traditional narrative method.

In parallel to the goal to enhance student-centered learning activities, the program also offers changes in the methods of student assessment. To this end, the program makers seek to develop performance-based assessment focusing on the measurement of the student’s performance in the learning activities and projects, without complete abandonment of traditional in-class exams. The program provides detailed explanation on these methods for consideration by the teachers (MoNE, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009).

The new program further put special emphasis upon skills. Traditionally, in Turkey the history teaching has been based largely on transmission of information and description of historical events. The new program seeks to develop a new approach that sets a balance between knowledge and skills. Skills are divided into two groups in the program as “primary skills” and “historical thinking skills”. Primary skills include the issues as “critical thinking”, “research and investigation”, “problem-solving” and “proper usage of Turkish language”. Historical thinking skills, on the other hand, include the skills as “thinking chronologically”, “historical interpretation and analysis” and “research based on historical inquiry” (MoNE, 2007; 2008a).

### **Teacher Autonomy in New History Curriculum**

As noted above, in terms of teacher autonomy, curriculum programs are analyzed in three different aspects: Overall goals and principles; teaching content planning; teaching methods and activities planning.

#### *Overall Goals and Principles*

Like previous history programs, the introduction part of the new program provides detailed explanations on overall goals, principles and teaching approaches; the following parts further classify in units the subjects and activities that constitute the teaching content. It is observed that introduction part of the new program is quite larger than that of the previous programs. The primary reason is its ambition and assertion to offer a radical transformation in history education. To make sure that this new approach is best elaborated, the program relies on detailed explanations on the overall goals, approaches, implementation principles and methods as well as assessment tools and materials to be used in the measurement of the students’ performance in the class.

A review focusing on the part where the general principles and approaches over the history program are explained confirms that the issue of teacher autonomy has been largely neglected by the program makers. Even though the overall approaches and principles are broadly explained, the new curriculum program does not make any clear and obvious reference to the *teacher autonomy* or to another concept or approach relating to it (MoNE, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009).

The program puts emphasis on the use of different and efficient methods in the classroom, asking for teachers’ pursuit of innovative tools to make sure that the students actively participate in the in-class discussions and debates. It fails,

however, to offer a visible and concrete structure where broad authority and autonomy will be given to the teachers for planning and implementing of the teaching contents and activities.

Otherwise, this is not limited to the case of history program. The official texts detailing the general outlines of the curriculum reforms introduced for the elementary and secondary education make no specific reference to the enhancement of teacher autonomy (MoNE, n.d.).

#### *Teaching Content Planning*

In regards to the definition of teaching subjects, the program keeps largely the approach of the previous programs. In Turkey, teaching subjects have been traditionally drafted in details in the history curriculum. The content description of the history syllabi was fairly similar to a book's *Table of Contents* which provides all details and sub-themes. Detailed description of the subjects leaves no room for the teachers to take initiative and responsibility with respect to the content. This affects not only the teachers but also the authors of the textbooks. The authors have to observe normally the rules and standards set out by the MoNE and prepare the textbooks in accordance with the curriculum content. Because of detailed and comprehensive description of the content in the program, the contents of different textbooks of a history course become almost very similar (Kabapınar, 2003; Öztürk, 2009b).

The new program brings some changes to the fore in respect to the definition of the teaching content. Unlike previous history syllabi (MoNE, 1981; 1993), the news syllabi (MoNE, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009) do not list the main subjects in detailed titles. Instead, the units are divided into sub-units and for each sub-unit, 'acquisitions', 'activity examples' and 'explanations' are provided. However, even though absence of the detailed subjects list represents a positive and progressive change, the new program still describes teaching content in a manner widely detailed as 'acquisitions', 'activity examples' and 'explanations'. Therefore, this change does not bring a significant effect regarding the degree of the teacher's role in planning of the teaching content.

The curriculum program does not make clear the emphasis that teachers have to follow strictly the recommended teaching subjects. It should be noted that former programs followed the same path and did not make any obvious reference to this issue. In practice, however, teachers follow strictly the content drafted in the curriculum program. In conclusion, regarding the choice and planning of the teaching subjects, the new history program brings some

changes, but it fails to create a greater space of autonomy for the teachers to take an important role in the curriculum development process.

#### *Teaching Methods and Activities Planning*

In regards to the selection and planning of teaching methods and activities, the situation is not very different. As already noted, the new program offers a new teaching approach based mainly on student-centered activities. The program outlines a number of assignments and duties for the teachers in the implementation of the envisaged works. It puts emphasis on the use of different and efficient methods in the classroom, asking for teachers' pursuit of innovative tools to make sure that the students actively participate in the in-class activities. But it only briefly touches upon the autonomy that the teachers need in fulfillment of their duties and assignments. The program makes an indirect reference to this issue; the relevant part notes that the "sample activities" given in the program are exemplary and the teachers could implement them as they are or they could change these activities for greater efficiency (MoNE, 2007).

A review of the "sample activities" content in program, however, shows that these "examples" are not serving as guides for teachers to develop teaching activities; instead, they are determining the core content of the activities. The program gives the "sample activities" for each teaching subject and the number of such examples is so large that they constitute the whole content of the history courses. The syllabi of history courses of the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades include 74, 165, 138 and 134 "sample activities" respectively (MoNE, 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009).

In conclusion, the program is vague and contradictory with respect to the selection of teaching methods. It could be argued that, compared to teaching content planning, the new history program provide some autonomy to teachers in teaching methods and activities planning. It stresses the diversity of teaching methods as a general principle and, urges the teachers to assume greater roles in the enhancement of the teaching activities. However, the program does not explain clearly and explicitly the sphere of authority which teachers have in selecting and planning of the teaching methods and activities. In others words, in the new program there are general principles, but there is not a concrete structure that can empower and encourage teachers to take a further role and initiative in decision making regarding teaching methods and activities.

Moreover, it leaves little room for the teachers by detailing vastly the “sample activities” to be employed in the classroom.

### **Textbooks selection**

Selection of course materials is another major point with respect to teacher autonomy. Textbooks are the basic materials for history teaching in Turkey. While it is not, in essence, an issue related to curriculum programs, a change also occurred regarding textbook selection in the same period of the curriculum change.

Until the 2000s, in Turkey textbooks have been published by private publishing houses subject to approval by the MoNE; the schools were free to determine the textbooks they would use in their classes. In addition to private publishers, a public publishing house affiliated with the MoNE undertook publication of some textbooks. The textbooks are provided to the students for free by the government since 2003 in elementary schools and since 2006 in secondary schools. Nowadays the textbook diversity model remains in effect; however, the distribution of the textbooks for free has created serious problems regarding textbook diversity. Because of this practice, the number of the textbooks published by the private publishers has considerably decreased (ERG, 2008).

This problem is more visible in secondary education. In recent years, the textbooks for most of the school disciplines in this level are published only by the MoNE’s publishing house. This was also the case with the history courses. Even though there was formerly diversity, after the curriculum reform (2007) the new history textbooks for the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades were prepared only by MoNE’s publishing house. Use of a single textbook for history courses presents serious problems from the many aspects. With respect to teacher autonomy, lack of the possibility for the teachers to choose the main course material poses a great problem.

### **CONCLUSION**

The new curriculum program seeks to introduce a number of innovative approaches and methods in an attempt to improve the history education. The program, however, pays little attention to teacher autonomy, a key component that is essential to make sure that the goals of the curriculum reform are fulfilled. It reserves little room for the teachers in the selection and planning of the teaching content, methods and materials. Actually, it could be argued that, compared to the former history programs, the new one introduces some limited progress with regard to teacher’s roles in curriculum planning. Considering the

ambitious goals of the curriculum reform, however, this is insufficient progress. It could be concluded that the improvement of teacher autonomy is not one of the explicit and prior objectives of the curriculum reform. Consequently the new history program fails to construct a new framework that can allow and encourage teachers to assume a greater role in the development of teaching. It is obvious that the lack of teacher autonomy still remains as a grave problem in the new history curriculum.

Actually, the implementation of general goals presented by the new school curriculum require enhancement of teacher autonomy. The reformist discourse states that one of the primary goals of the curriculum reform is to introduce a new method of teaching focusing on the needs, interests and demands of the students and considering their diversities. This can be done by encouraging and allowing teachers to take initiative in curriculum development. The number one condition of this is to make sure that they have a broad sphere of power and autonomy where they are allowed picking and planning the course content, methods and materials. This incompatibility between the goals of the curriculum reform and the reality of the new programs reveal the difficulty to change the long-established conception and structure of the Turkish educational system where the Ministry exercises a strict control over the school curriculum.

It appears not easy to transform this structure which has existed over decades. Teacher autonomy is one core issue that needs to be addressed in order to adequately deal with the current educational problems in Turkey. In a reform initiative failing to consider this issue, the principles such as the student-centered teaching will remain inevitably unfulfilled. In order to overcome this problem, the teachers as well as the school institutions should be empowered with regard to decision making over the school curriculum and its implementation.

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