

A National Reading Campaign in Turkey: 100 Basic Literary Works

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of a national reading campaign in Turkey called “100 Basic Literary Works”. Participants were 209 females and 115 males students who were recruited on volunteer basis from three high schools in Kutahya, Turkey. The data collection instrument was a self-report questionnaire that assessed students’ perceptions on “100 Basic Literary Works” campaign. The results indicated that most of them were aware of the campaign, however, no one has read all the books that was listed in the campaign. Data obtained in this study were discussed in relation to how other nationwide reading campaigns can be carried out with wide participation and to enhance students’ reading attitudes.

Key words: Reading campaign • high school students • Turkey

INTRODUCTION

Teaching students to read and to carry through their lives with pleasure is among main aims of a country’s education system. However, in many countries, including Turkey, no matter how much it is desired, students haven’t been able to be encouraged into this habit yet. Therefore, in such countries, various activities and campaigns are implemented so as to instill this habit into the individuals. Some of the best known of these efforts are the “Read On” National Reading Campaign in England and “Get Caught Reading” campaign in the USA.

Some of the national exams like OSS, LGS, etc and especially an international report called PIRLS 2001 have recently shown the alarming failure in reading habit in Turkey. Thanks to these indicators, the Turkish Ministry of Education (MEB) has finally started to take necessary steps and thus decided to start nation-wide reading campaigns for high school students in 2004 and primary school students in 2006.

At the start of the 2004-2005 education period, MEB issued a circular and sent it to all the high schools in Turkey. In this circular, it was stated that 100 basic literary works were compiled by the ministry from Turkish and world literature thanks to the contributions of several non-governmental organizations, journalists and various social and scientific circles and that students be made to read these works at schools by reading teachers.

It was also declared in this circular that the students who had read the most of these works be awarded and the books be promoted to students in various ways such as panels, discussions, dramas, etc. In this regard, it was also emphasized that school libraries be reviewed and be turned into favourite places where students would love to go.

MEB started to send the books that were already in hand to schools and having sent the list of the books to schools, promised that the books that were out of print would soon be printed and distributed to schools.

In this study, the effects of a national reading campaign in Turkey called “100 Basic Literary Works” were examined. Moreover, whether Turkish high school students read any book included in “100 Basic Literary Works Campaign” or not, to what extent they read, which of them they liked, which writers they liked mostly and the relationships between the tendencies of the high school students and their gender were investigated.

Theoretical framework: The PIRLS International Report 2001 prepared by Mullis *et al.* [1] covers 35 countries and reveals several characteristics of these countries related to reading habits. In this report, the average reading achievement is determined to be 500 and while Sweden is at the top with 561 points, Turkey is below the average with 449 as the 28th in the list. In the other sections of the report, Turkey is again below the average. Moreover, in the other researches about the subject [2-7],

similar findings have been recorded about the reading habit in Turkey.

In order to improve the reading habits of students, MEB started a reading campaign “100 Basic Literary Works” for high school students across the country on 19th August, 2004. The ministry also issued a circular on the subject and sent it to all the high schools across the country. In this circular, the ministry wanted the schools managements and teachers to encourage their students to read these books. 73 of the books are selected from the most outstanding works of the Turkish literature and the rest are the most renowned classics of the world literature ranging from Beydeba and Socrates to Balzac and Dickens; from Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy to Hemingway and Steinbeck. The content of the circular can be summarized as follows:

In accordance with the Article 10 of the Basic Law of National Education No 1739, MEB was given the responsibility of taking measures to protect Turkish and minding this responsibility, the ministry declared that they had started this campaign. The ministry determined the main objective of the campaign as enabling the students to maintain their reading habits. Thus, they aimed to raise students who analyse, speak accurately and explicitly, have better perception, who don't fear to comment, who synthesize and discuss, think analytically, have understood that truth can be achieved not from a single point but through various perspectives; whose perception of beauty and aesthetics has developed; who are sophisticated and reliable and who mind national and moral values.

In the circular, the ministry also stated that although people are born with various capabilities, these skills never appear spontaneously but can be achieved through exposure to high-literary works suitable for their ages and nature. It was also pointed out in the paper that the preservation and development of the language can be possible if individuals maintain reading all their lives.

Moreover, it is also emphasized that thanks to reading activities in the guidance of reading teachers, a society with a rich cultural background who enjoys reading will be assured; therefore, one hundred books selected from the Turkish and the world literature were determined for high school students to read with the contributions of non-governmental organizations, journalists and various social and scientific circles.

Finally, it is expressed in the circular that a society composed of individuals-who have read the same literary books, have noticed and absorbed the richness of feelings and thoughts in those works-will possess

individuals who are more tolerant, sharing, sophisticated, independent and who have gained the ability to think democratically. It is also pointed out that by means of these one hundred books in the guidance of reading teachers, not only students' skills will flourish but they will also improve their vocabulary and thus use their language accurately and fluently.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: Participants were comprised of three hundred and twenty four (209 females and 115 males) students who were recruited on volunteer basis from three high schools in Kutahya, Turkey.

Instruments: The measurement tool was designed to explore students' perceptions on “100 Literary Works” campaign. The data collection instrument was given to 3 experts who are interested in Reading Instruction. Each expert given the instrument was asked to examine the form critically in terms of its content and response format. They were also asked to indicate the items that should be revised. The participants were presented with a total of 10 questions with replies. With the permission granted from managers of the schools, the instruments were administered to the students during the class sessions by the researcher. During the data collection process, the purpose of the study was explained to all participants.

Data analysis: Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 11.5 for Windows. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe responses to the questionnaire items as well as demographic/background characteristics of participants. Inferential statistics was used including two-way contingency table analysis with chi-square. To guard against the interpretation of non-meaningful results, Cramer's V , a statistic where values of 0.10, 0.30 and 0.50 represent small, medium and large effect sizes, was reported [8].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings about the campaign: When high school students were asked by the ministry whether they were informed about the one hundred basic literary works, 66.8% of them said “Yes”, while 22.8% said “somewhat” and 10.2% said “No”. As a result, 90% of the students were informed about the campaign. The fact that the majority of the students were informed about such a

campaign can be considered as an important beginning to increase their motivation in reading. Those who were informed attributed this information to their teachers (64.0%), to the media (12.0%) and to their friends (6.20%). Although the ministry initially put this responsibility on the school administration and the reading teacher, the fact that the media had a contribution -though very small (12.0%)-can be regarded as a positive improvement. When the students were asked whether this campaign had a positive effect or not, 86.8% of the students gave a reply as follows: 25.5% “yes”, 37.8% “somewhat” and 23.4% “no”. As a result, three quarters of the students had positive opinions about the campaign. This situation which seems to be the main objective of the campaign can be evaluated as the fact the students have been able to increase their reading habit through these books. In other words, it can be said that this campaign contributed to the achievement of the desired effect if not completely. Of the one hundred books, the students who read “none” were 12.9%; who read “1-10 books” were 60.0%; who read “11-20” were 9.5% and who read “more than 20” were 5.1% whereas no one was ranked reading all the books. Considering these results, it can be seen that none of the students read enough of the one hundred books completely. However, although the number is small, it can be considered as a positive achievement that adolescents read some books only thanks to this campaign. This situation-that is, students read few books-could have been due to the attitudes of the school administration, the teacher and the students. Regarding from where/by whom the books were provided, the students expressed that 22.8% of them bought the books; 20.6% got them from their friends; 19.1% had the books in the classroom library or at school; 6.5% received them from their teachers; 6.5% borrowed them from the public library and 5.8% cited other sources (neighbours, etc.). The situation of not reading in the previous question might have resulted from the fact that the school and classroom libraries were not well-equipped with these literary works.

As shown in Table 1, when the students were asked which of the 100 basic literary works they loved most, they ranked “Calikusu” (meaning “Wren”) the most by the Turkish novelist Resat Nuri Guntekin, which was written in the 1920s and has been made into a film several times up to now. In other studies carried out in Turkey [2, 9], this book was considered as the most loved one. It is regarded as one of the most outstanding romances in Turkish literature. The second book ranked in the list was “9. Hariciye Kogusu” (meaning “9th. External Diseases Hospital Ward”), written by the Turkish novelist and

Table 1: The results of students’ rankings of their mostly loved literary works

Most liked writers	f	%
Resat Nuri Guntekin	57	21.4
Peyami Safa	18	6.7
Omer Seyfettin	15	5.6
Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu	13	4.8
Victor-Marie Hugo	10	3.7
Total	99	42.2

Table 2: The results of students’ rankings of their mostly liked writers

Most loved literary works	f	%
Calikusu	45	17.0
9. Hariciye Kogusu	17	6.4
Les Miserables	14	5.3
Yaban	12	4.5
Crime and Punishment	10	3.7
Total	98	36.9

Table 3: The results of students’ rankings of their wants to have included

Preferences to be included	f	%
Su Cilgin Turkler	13	18.5
Metal Firtina	10	14.2
Yaprak Dokumu	7	10.0
Total	30	42.7

columnist Peyami Safa in 1930. This book is considered as the best “patient, ailment, hospital” novel having been written in Turkish literature so far. The two most loved books of the Turkish high school students from the world classics were “Les Miserables” by French Victor Hugo and “Crime and Punishment” by Russian Dostoyevsky respectively. One of the most loved books in the list was “Yaban” (meaning “Savage”) by Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu, which is a “village novel” published in 1932.

When the students were asked which writers of the books they had read they liked best, they answered as shown in Table 2. When the books and writer liked best are considered, it is seen that they generally overlap. That is to say that whose books are liked best are also liked best. Resat Nuri Guntekin, whose novel “Calikusu” became the favourite of all, lived between 1896 and 1956 and wrote stories and plays other than novels. Peyami Safa (1899-1963), the second most loved in the list, was born into a literary family. Orhan Pamuk is the first novelist in Turkish literature who has been given by Nobel Literacy Award thanks to deal with finding new symbols of the clash and fusion of cultures while

Table 4: The results of two-way contingency table analysis with chi-square regarding the female and male high school students' rankings of knowing the campaign

Knowing the campaign	Female		Male		χ^2	p	Cramer's V
	f	%	f	%			
Yes	139	66.5	78	67.8	11.08	.004	.18
Somewhat	56	26.8	18	15.7			
No	14	6.7	19	16.5			
Total	209	100	115	100			

pursuing the mournful spirit of Istanbul-the city where he was living". This could be traced to one another novel of Peyami Safa called "Fatih-Harbiye". Furthermore, Peyami Safa is regarded as one of the most assertive novelists of Turkish literature. Omer Seyfettin (1884-1920) who is considered to be the first and the most important storywriters of Turkish literature was ranked in third order. He is the most loved storywriter among kids [9]. Moreover, he is also read by youngsters and adults. One of the writers among those loved by high school students is the novelist, storywriter and memorialist Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu (1889-1974). This writer also served as war reporter of Atatürk the Great. French Victor-Marie Hugo (1802-1885) is the one Turkish adolescents love best in the world literature. The reason for this love can be attributed to the famous novel "Les Miserables".

The participation of the students to the question "which other book or books would you prefer to be included in "100 basic literary works?" was very low (70 of the 325 in the research). This can be interpreted as the fact that the students, on the whole, loved the list of 100 basic literary works. Additionally, students' having a general disinterest in reading causing them to have inexperienced few alternatives works to suggest could be one possible explanation for this finding. When the answers of the adolescents were analysed, it was seen that they gave the names of 40 other books. Table 3 presents the books they concentrated on. The first in the table is "Su Cilgin Turkler" (meaning "These Crazy Turks")-a novel by Turgut Özakman published in April, 2005. This book, selling a great number considering the conditions in Turkey (achieving 274th edition in 2006), is about the formation of the Turkish Republic and the founder Atatürk. Second to it is "Metal Firtina" (meaning "Metal Storm") by the young writers Burak Turna and Orkun Uçar. It is about a possible war between the USA and Turkey because of north Iraq. First published in 2004, this book has been talked over a lot in Turkey like "Su Cilgin Turkler". As a consequence of its appeal, the second and third sequels of the book have been released.

Moreover, it is thought that these two works have been effective in the increasing nationalism lately in Turkey. Another book the high school students had a consensus on was "Yaprak Dokumu" (meaning "Autumn") by Resat Nuri Guntekin, whose novel "Calikusu" had become the favourite in the list as mentioned above. The book was first released as a novel in 1939 and then republished in 1971 as a play and finally became a TV serial in 2006. The reason why students chose this book might have been the fact that this serial was still on during this research.

Findings about the number of the books read: The answers given by the high school students to the question "What is the approximate number of the books you have read up to now?" as follows: all of them (100) by 20.0%, 51-100 by 23.1%, 21-50 by 23.4%, 11-20 by 20.3% and less than 10 by 11.7%. It is required for this age group (mostly 15-18 ages) who have been educated for almost 12 years to have read more than 100 books in order to be counted as good readers. However, the results above show that only one fifth of the students have achieved this goal. This negative nature of the Turkish students has also been detected in other researches [1, 2]. Finally, the answers given to another question "Do you find the number of the books you have read so far adequate?" complementing the previous one above are as follows: "yes" by 8.3%, "somewhat" by 36.3% and "no" by 48.6%. These figures are also verifying the fact that students accept that they haven't read sufficiently. A similar consequence has been recorded in England [10].

Gender differences: As a result of the analysis carried out to determine whether there was a statistical difference regarding the articles in the questionnaire depending on gender, the only significant difference was found in the answers given to the first question (Table 4).

As shown in Table 4, a statistically significant difference was found between boys and girls in being informed about the 100 basic literary works. When the difference is analysed, it can be seen that boys mainly

accumulate more in “no” option, which might be an indicator of the fact that girls are more interested in reading than boys. In other researches [1-3, 6, 9-17], similar results can be seen. However, the fact that there isn't another significant difference between girls and boys in the other 9 questions between the genders can be interpreted as the fact that boys and girls show similar behaviours in reading.

Final thoughts: We believe there is no more vital or basic skill in all of education than that of reading. For this reason, starting from preschool years, students should first be exposed to books and the reading experience should be both pleasurable and habit forming. However, most of the researches on the reading skills, interests, habits, tendencies and motivations of students all around the world [2-5, 7, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 21-29] have shown that they haven't been well-equipped with

these reading qualities. Nevertheless, as seen in this study, nationwide reading campaigns with wide participation might enhance their reading attitudes. Therefore, the success of such campaigns depends heavily on the willingness and eagerness of the campaigns' administrators. It is accepted that had the parents, teachers, school administrations and the media supported this reading campaign more, it could have been more successful. Besides, another thing to be done in such campaigns is keeping it aloft on the agenda. It could be a great asset if TV is used at an optimal level considering the enormous effect of it on the society all over the world. For instance, in a TV serial in Turkey named “Kurtlar Vadisi” (meaning "Valley of the Wolves"), which broke viewing records in 2006, when one of the actors was seen reading the book [Adolf Hitler-Mein Kampf (meaning "My Struggle")] it became bestseller in Turkey instantly on the following days.

Appendix I

Thank you for taking part in this questionnaire. This sheet is designed to learn about your perceptions regarding “100 basic literary works”. Please tick the items that appeals to you!
Gender: () Female () Male

1. Do you know “100 basic literary works” that Ministry of Education recommended?

() Yes () Somewhat () No

Note: If your answer is no, you can skip to 10th question.

2. From whom did you firstly hear about “100 basic literary works”?

() Teacher () Friend () Family

() Media (TV, newspaper etc.) () Other:.....

3. Does reading “100 basic literary works” have a positive affect on your reading?

() Yes () Somewhat () No

4. How many of the 100 basic literary works have you read up to now?

() None () 1-10 () 11-20 () 21-33

() 34-50 () 51-70 () 71-90 () All of them.

5. Which of the 100 basic literary works did you like most?

6. Of the writers of “100 basic literary works” you read, which one did you like most?

7. Which other book or books would you prefer to be included in “100 basic literary works”?

8. Of the books you have read in “100 basic literary works”, from whom or where did you get most? Please rank them.

() bought

() teachers

() friends

() classroom library or at school

() public library

() Other:.....

9. Approximately how many books have you read up to now?

() None () Less than 10 () 11-20 () 21-50 () 51-100

10. Are you satisfied with the amount of your reading?

() Yes () Somewhat () No

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