

Primary Education Curriculum Reforms in Turkey

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to examine and evaluate the basic structure of changes in primary educational curricula in Turkey since the establishment of Republic. The study is mainly qualitative and is based on literature and document analyses and teaching curricular reviews. The research findings indicate that primary educational reforms in Turkey have been basically focused on enabling students to acquire and to have national consciousness throughout eighty years, but the 2004 primary curricula constitute a radical change due to the fact that they include educational norms, democratic consciousness, concepts, skills and values prolonged from the educational trends in the globalizing world, in general and the European Union, in particular.

Key words: Society · educational policy · primary education · *Curriculum* · Turkey

INTRODUCTION

In historical perspective, there have been significant changes in the educational policies of Turkey in parallel to socio-political transformations experienced by the last two centuries which are characterized with the transition from traditional state to modern state. In this process, the qualities of relationships with the Western world and the general characteristics of international political systems have been quite determining in regard to the formation of Turkey's modernization character [1]. The Administrative Reform of 1839, the Reformation Charter of 1856, Constitutional Monarchy attempts in 1876 and 1908, the establishment of the Republic in 1923, the transition to the multi-party system in 1950 and military coups in 1960 and 1980 are main turning points of this process. The westernization and modernization policies which started with the Administrative Reform of 1839 in Turkish history were firstly directed towards the realms of education and military. As was the case in other fields, a considerable reform movement started in the field of education in the direction of the Western Civilization with the establishment of the Republic, which is a stepping stone of great significance to be a modern state in the Turkish history. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding leader of the modern Turkey, gave priority to education and culture to achieve social change and modernization. In the framework of the educational reform aiming at re-structuring and organizing the Turkish education system, John Dewey, who was one of the most influential educational scientists and intellectuals at that time, was

invited to Turkey in 1924 in order to learn and benefit from his opinions and thoughts about the structure, vision and general characteristics of education. Dewey prepared reports for the education systems of Soviet Russia, China and Mexico as well as Turkey. Dewey's opinions about the structuring of the Turkish education system were tried to be implemented affectively [2]. For Atatürk, the most prominent factor in the maintenance of the Republic regime and of its reforms is the education and sophistication of individuals in a modern manner [3]. Therefore, the basic grounds considered in the educational curricula in the Republic period have been national concern, scientific reasoning, modernization and secularism. Since the beginning of the republic period, the Turkish education system has been affected by and transformed in the line with social, political and economic structure of the Turkish society, general trends in the western world, scientific and technical innovations, opinions of foreign specialists and Atatürk's education conceptions.

A very contemporary phenomenon of globalization is characterized with uncertainties in all aspects of life. In this age of great uncertainties the accession of Turkey to the European Union, which has become one of the biggest global powers, is amounting to be much more important day by day. The accession to the European Union process is evaluated as a crucial opportunity for Turkey with regard to modifying, modernizing and functionalizing its problematic education system as well as getting social, economic and technological benefits. However, it seems difficult for Turkey to be a full member to the European Union [4, 5].

Turkey has had close relations with both Western European countries and the United States of America since its establishment as a nation-state in the framework of its modernization/westernization prospect [6-8]. The accession to the European Union process has constituted one of the top political priorities of Turkey as the most prominent and noteworthy option since 1987, which is its application date for full membership, to be able to overcome its modernization crisis and bottleneck [9]. The formation of Turkey's educational policies was greatly influenced by the projects of the World Bank and the harmonization and standardization process to the European Union in the 1990s. The educational reform endeavors have gained impetus in Turkey to fulfill prospective requisites in the field of education by October 2005, namely when the negotiations for full membership to the European Union process began for Turkey.

The accession and social adaptation of Turkey to the European Union requires a considerable mentality change. For this, education, but especially primary education has a critical role, because the most suitable educational period for mentality, attitude and value change is the primary education. The primary education in Turkey constitutes the basis of the educational system with 35 000 schools, 400 000 teachers and 10 500 000 students it covers. For Akpınar [10] the Turkish students in primary schools strongly advocate the fundamental values of the European Union, but they see Turkey's full membership to the Union as a low possibility. The first things associated by these students with the European Union are wealth-welfare, better educational potentials and democracy-human rights, sequentially. The mostly known member states of the European Union by these students are Germany, France and Britain, in sequential manner. Primary schools have a determinative role in the social integration of Turkey into the European Union and primary education period has critical significance in the acquisition of social values and strong personal traits.

AIM

The aim of this study is to examine the basic structure of the changes in primary educational curricula in Turkey, dated 1924, 1926, 1936, 1948, 1962, 1968, 1998 and 2004-namely since the establishment of the Republic-and characterized with modernization in general and the accession process to the European Union in particular. And, it is also aimed at evaluating how primary educational curricula in Turkey have been affected by the general social and educational trends in the changing world and by the accession process to the European

Union. The study carried out qualitatively is based on literature and document analyses-including the primary education curricula of Turkey dated 1924, 1926, 1936, 1948, 1962, 1968, 1998 and 2004. The data of the study were obtained through the analyses of literature and the reviews of documents including the primary educational curricula which had been issued since the establishment of the Republic. When collecting data, the document analysis stages were applied, which are the access to documents, checking of originality, comprehension of documents, data analysis and usage of data [11, 12]. In the study, the primary educational curricula which had been issued in Turkey since the establishment of the Republic were examined on the basis of their vision, structure, aims and contents. And, how the general social and educational trends in the changing world and the educational norms and preferences of the European Union have affected these curricula were evaluated

CURRICULA DEVELOPMENT ENDEAVORS IN EDUCATION IN TURKEY

The most significant structural changes in the field of education have been made in primary education since the establishment of the Turkish Republic. The main purpose of the new social construct started with the setting up of the Republic has been to give a modern direction to the existing traditional social structure, to enable the Turkish people to have a modern citizenship consciousness and to restructure social context by means of education. In this vein, the basic priorities of the education system in the Republic period have been the unification of all schooling areas in the one framework, the organizing of education, the developing the quality of education and the spreading of education throughout all society [13, 14]. The education in Turkey is seen as a constitutional right and as the task of the social state which is based on laws. Education is one of the most effective means of economic, political, social, cultural integration and transformation. Globally, all individuals and societies have been experiencing a constant change by affecting each other. In Turkey, the compulsory general education level which gives the chance to reach all citizens is the primary education. In primary education, it is tried to enable all individuals in the society to acquire the foundational basis of the knowledge, feelings and skills required by the century within which they live.

When the endeavors to develop educational curricula in Turkey are examined, it is observed that the first of them had started by 1924, mainly in the field of primary education and these initial endeavors had guided

reforms in the field of secondary education in the following years. By the 1950s, the curricular development activities have begun to be executed in a more systematic manner. These activities had been carried out mainly in the form of preparing course and course topic lists until the 1950s. K. V. Wofford came to Turkey in 1952 to examine rural schools and later on, he prepared a detailed report upon his observations. Following his report, a more systematic approach has started to be applied in making educational curricula. When the endeavors to develop educational curricula in Turkey are taken into consideration in a historical perspective, it can be mentioned that many curricula were prepared, issued, reviewed, changed or renewed [15-24] in 1924, 1926, 1927, 1931-1932, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1948, 1949, 1962, 1968, 1970-1971, 1981, 1985, 1990, 1995, 1998 and 2004 for primary education (8 years), namely separately for elementary schools (5 years) and secondary schools (3 years after 5 years of elementary education) until they were united as compulsory education in the primary education framework in 1997. Of these curricula, especially the 1924, 1926, 1936, 1948, 1968, 1981 and 2004 curricula are crucial with regard to their political background, social bases, distinctive emphasis on education, vision and elaborated inclusion of curricula development processes and principles.

In the nation-state establishment process in Turkey started in 1923, it is seen that the education of citizenship at school is based on two purposes. These purposes spring from desired citizenship profile and can be stated as being civilized and having sense patriotism. The arrangements made after the 1980 military coup corresponded with the period of re-structuring the nation-state. The most obvious characteristic of citizenship in this period was its formal nature. Namely, it aims at passive obedience and identity lacking civil participation. As had been the case in other courses, it had been tried to prepare and arrange the curricula in the courses of citizenship education on the basis of enabling people to see and to understand the benefits of the new state order properly until 1948. From the beginning of the Republic period to now, the basic ground of primary educational curricula has been the Turkish Society and Kemalism. In the 2004 primary educational curricula, an out-front understanding centered on Global Interactions has been applied.

In a historical perspective, the basic grounds of the Turkish primary educational curricula which were referred are the following: "To bring up good citizens who can adapt into their surroundings" in the 1926 primary educational curriculum; "to bring up students who are sophisticated, who are giving importance to their national

history and who have adopted the Turkish reforms" in the 1936 curriculum; and "to cultivate citizens who are good physically and mentally and in terms of their human interactions, who have perceived the contribution of having a flourished human resource to economic life and who have understood that the Turkish Republic is based on human rights and it is a national, democratic, secular and social state" in the 1968 curriculum. The 2004 Primary Educational Curriculum for Social Studies includes the following statements: "Having the consciousness to be a part of humanity, the Turkish citizens are sensitive to the matters of importance for their country in particular and the whole world in general. They have understood the basic constituents of the Turkish culture and history and they have accepted the fact that the "cultural heritage", which paves the way for the formation of national consciousness, is required to be protected and developed. They have also set their lives on the basis of democratic ideals by perceiving the historical evolution of some significant concepts, such as human rights, national sovereignty, democracy, secularism and republic and the impact of them on modern Turkey." It is observed that the discourse of "national character" was strongly emphasized in the 1936 curriculum, but a more out-front approach was set forth in the 1948 curriculum. It is observed in the 2004 curricula that there has been a strong emphasis on international values, skills and interactions in addition to the special importance given to "national culture." When the curricula prepared in the years between 1923 and 1950 are probed in terms of their structures, aims and contents, it is seen that the endeavors brought out in the field of primary education with good intentions could not be diffused among large human masses in a desired level due to the existing socio-economic conditions at those times.

In Turkey, the curricula development endeavors had been performed mainly in the form of preparing course and course topic lists until the 1950s. In the following decade, the curricula development activities were again centered on the field of primary education. The innovations brought out by the 1968 curriculum were basically about the application of the overall teaching approach, which had enabled to only 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades until that time, to 4th and 5th grades as well [25]. Among the primary educational curricula issued in Turkey until now, the 1968 curriculum seems to be the most influential and to be applied in the longest time span. There had been some changes in this curriculum in time, but it had been operational up to the curricular changes in 1998. The basic National Education law numbered as 1789 and adopted in 1973 regulated the primary education to be eight years in

duration by bringing about the notion of Basic Education in Eight Years. The implementation of this law could start in the school period between 1981 and 1982 as trial. This had continued until 1997. The duration of the primary education which was set forth as five years in 1924 could be extended to eight years after about 50 years. The extension of the duration of primary education to eight years has affected curricular development activities. The curricula prepared in the 1990s for the courses of natural studies, social studies or actual life learning were tried to be in accordance with the principle of entirety in primary education.

The curricula development endeavors executed in 2004 in accordance with the new perspective have taken all changes and advances in the world-particularly the recent curricular reforms performed consecutively in the Far East, North America and European Union and the norms, targets and educational conception of the European Union as a reference point. In regard to the Turkish modernization process, the thresholds of major significance have seemed to be the changes in educational curricula since the Administrative Reforms of 1839, the transformation both nationally and globally, the notions of human rights and freedom of speech, the development of a plural and flexible mentality model and the steps taken for accession to the European Union and democratization.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is observed that Turkey has been making efforts to be a part of the European Union and developed countries. When the primary educational curricula development endeavors in Turkey are examined on a historical basis, it is observed that the curricula dated 1924, 1926, 1936, 1948, 1968, 1998 and 2004 involve radical reforms in relation to their political background, social basis, pace to change and vision.

In Turkey, the 2004 primary educational curricula were intended to involve the qualities which are tried to be offered to individuals upon the general aims of primary education, the characteristics which are aimed to be given to individuals according to international organizations-such as the UNESCO or UNICEF-and the attributions which are demanded to be proposed to individuals through education process in many countries, including the United States of America, Britain, Australia, France, Germany, Canada, Greece, Bulgaria, Ireland and Scotland [22, 24, 26]. In this regard, the 2004 educational curricula include and imply the educational norms and democratic

consciousness and ideals, which are required by the globalizing world in general and the European Union in particular, quite more than all of the earlier curricula did. The 2004 primary educational curricula of Turkey have an innovative discourse and structure in general. In respect of parallelism with global trends and educational studies, it is seen that the 2004 primary educational curricula were attempted to be designed in compliance with new approaches. While the focal point of the primary educational curricula prior to the 2004 curricula was comprised of content/subject matters, the 2004 curricula gave more importance to thinking processes of students and accentuated the eminency of students who prefer thinking and acquiring various skills, concepts and values, instead of students who tend to memorizing.

Educational curricula convey substantial values and institutional priorities [27]. The way followed in managing, changing and improving education has the strength to create a more objective and more rational synergy throughout the society. The phenomenon of education mirrors the whole social reality within which people live. Here, it should be considered that the social reality includes not just economic facets, but a quite complex series of relationships including socialization processes, ideological constructs, power relations and connections between the state and the individual and also between the society and the individual. All the attempts to modify education systems are profoundly valuable with regard to increasing the quality of national education system and contributing to the structure of international relations.

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