



# The Principals of Primary Schools Ideas on Their School Development Strategies and Practices

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## Abstract

The school improvement came into question that schools meet the educational needs has been made to make it more effective, changing in parallel globalization. The purpose of school improvement is to rise levels of student achievement and school environment to increase participation. In this context, the basic aim of this study was to determine the ideas of the principals about school improvement and what strategies they use in order to improve their schools. The research was conducted with the principals of the primary schools in Karabağlar, a town in the province of metropolitan area of Izmir. This study is a descriptive research that used qualitative data. The data were collected through semi-structured questions from 37 principals and analyzed qualitatively. Some of the results obtained in this study were as follows: According to the principals, on the top of the list of the things to do to improve schools were "improving co-operation and communication". In the second place, there were "teacher development" and "meet the need for personnel". In third place there were "improving the physical conditions" and "provision of educational technologies and increasing their use". The first thing the principals do to improve their schools was "increasing the number of the technological devices and the use of technology". On the top of the list of what the principals want to do but cannot do were "lack of financial allocations" and "lack of financial sources".

## Key Words

Primary School, School Improvement, Principal, Change, Strategy.

School Improvement (SI) has been an important concept in terms of increasing competition in parallel with globalization, the need for enhancing educational standards, differentiating schools

with limited public funds and making them more effective (Mortimore, Mortimore, & Thomas, 1994; Sahlberg, 2006). Moreover, it has always been the concern for both parents and educational stakeholders, and also the society to have all children taken a high quality education and graduated (Gunn, Pomahac, Evelyn, & Tailfeathers, 2011). In Turkey, especially since 1990's, there have been many attempts for reforms to improve the educational system. These attempts have usually been initiated at the center in a bureaucratic mechanism and managed by it. With the projects funded by the World Bank, there have been partial but significant changes both in the central organization of the educational system and in the structure and the functioning of some sub-systems. By the help of these changes, a process towards schools' getting

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in touch with the market have started in both the central mechanism and the schools (Ünal, 2003).

Within the National Education Improvement Project, the Curriculum Laboratory School (CLS) application funded by the WB started in 1990 and was completed in 1999. In this application, a method named as school improvement model was carried out. The important aspect of this model was the School Improvement Management Teams (SIMT) to be found and the strategic planning. The piloting was found to be successful by the Ministry and the application was extended to primary and high schools. In Clause 99 of the Regulation for Primary Education Institutions published in the official gazette (Date: 27.08.2003, No: 25212), School Improvement Management Teams were decided to be founded in each primary school and it has become an obligation to do SI activities under the leadership of school principals.

### Change and Leadership

The advances in technology and the change in economic and social life affect educational institutions and as a result, change the principals' roles. Today, principals' role cannot be sustained anymore by the traditional and bureaucratic authority which is legalized by law (Aydin, 1998; Fernandez, 2000). While school principals' role used to be a program administrator in the sixties and seventies, an effective school and education leader in the eighties, it became a leader of change and transformation in the nineties (Hallinger, 1992). Leadership has been rather defined as collaborative activities of individuals working together and set of behaviors they share, and it is more co-operative and distributive in terms of enhancing schools' capacity for school improvement (Day et al., 2010; Gronn, 2008; Harris, 2008).

Maintaining the planned process of change and enhancing the quality of education depends on creating the appropriate conditions and climate which will improve both schools' and individuals' learning capacity. The person who would create this environment is the school principal. The principals have an affect on students and teachers as well as their crucial role in improving schools, the change at schools and implementing reforms (Clarke, 2000; Day & Gu, 2010; Fullan, 2007; Goodson, 2001; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1993; Penlington, Kington, & Day, 2008; Seriovanni, 1995; Şişman, 2002).

Recent studies have focused on the relationship among school conditions, improvement capac-

ity and school leadership (Day et al., 2010; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Opdenakker & Van Damme, 2007). These studies showed that improving school performance depends on the changing leadership models and enhancing the schools' capacity for improvement (Day et al.).

### School Improvement

SI aims to empower the capacity of a school for managing the change, provide a higher quality education in it, and raise student achievement levels (Barth, 1990; Clarke, Harris, & Reynolds, 2004; Fullan, 1992; Hale, 2000). The basic emphasis of early SI practices has been on the shift towards a bottom-up approach in organizational change, focusing on the outcomes related to school process, qualitative evaluation and being school-wide (Balci, 2011; Clarke et al., 2004; Hopkins, 2001).

Although there are many SI models applied in different countries and their unique aspects, the studies showed that most of these models share the same points (Goldenberg, 2003). Some of these programs and projects present the basic principles for SI while some others elaborate on what should be done at which step. The ones with basic principles put the school at the center of change (Harris, 2000). These projects emphasize that without considering internal and external conditions of the school, the strategies to be developed and implemented for the sake of SI cannot be effective (Hopkins & Harris, 1997).

The projects or approaches elaborating on 'must-do's for SI assume that organizations are monotype. The projects of this type mostly focus on the benefits of more classrooms and different instructional strategies, and emphasize the dependence on the program in practice (Harris, 2000).

That the SI practices implemented school-wide in 1980's and 1990's led to improvement strategies focusing on the system level in 1990's and 2000's. According to this, if the systems support the change at school level, the likelihood of the change at schools to be successful is higher (Nehring & O'Brien, 2012). System-wide implementations in Ontario, Canada, Wales and England seem to support this hypothesis (Fullan, 2010; Harris, 2011). The analysis of system-wide change attempts suggests that the support only at the system level would not empower the improvement process, but the results of certain approaches would be effective (Mourshed, Chinezi, & Barber, 2010).

The period since the 1990's has been a period of standardization and marketing in education. During this term, teachers have lost their professional independence, and learning has focused on the success in standard tests (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). In a study, the findings of research for 20 years, it was concluded that for SI, there is a need for connecting schools with each other and with larger societies (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2012).

In the literature, there are different SI models and approaches, and the researchers studying SI have various theoretical points of view. With the assumption that they facilitate understanding the nature of SI practices at school level, researchers have referred to effective schools (Purkey & Smith, 1983), teacher training (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992), school leadership (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Southworth, 2002), and the knowledge based on effective teaching and learning (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008). On the other hand, some researchers describe SI in terms of the processes related to change with the assumption that improving the school is a way of organizational change. This direction of research includes the studies focusing on individual, organizational and educational change. Without considering the aspects such as teaching method, curriculum and all the SI process, these studies try to define and analyze the processes affected by successful change at schools (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). Another SI approach is derived from the literature on school and organization culture. Later, the efforts from this point of view are associated with learning organizations emphasizing the quality of systemic change (Mulford & Silins, 2003). Finally, SI studies have improved in itself by focusing on a narrower literature. So, the attempts for synthesizing these different theories related to SI to date have not reached a single inclusive theoretical perspective (Hallinger & Heck).

### School Improvement Strategies

SI practices can either be conducted at system level centrally or at a single school or any part of school. For successful SI, even though it would be a partial work, the school should be considered with all of its parts (Açıköz, 1993; Hale, 2000). What is important at this point is the school to be more effective. For planned change and successful SI, all the school staff should participate in the decision making and implementation process related to the works done at school (Davidson & Dell, 2003).

Many SI implementations assume that in practice,

all schools are the same, and what is good for one school also works for others. However, every school uses improvement strategies which are suitable for its context. For example, in a study examining 20 SI systems, it was found that a commanding and controlling culture is effective in turning low performance schools to medium performance ones. In the same study, an opposite approach in which teachers' efficacy and professionalism are referred in turning medium performance schools to high performance was found to be necessary (Mourshed et al., 2010).

Managing the change at school and empowering the school capacity usually require external supportive strategies (Barth, 1990; Clarke et al., 2004; Fullan, 1992). Low achieving schools cannot improve their school environments and need support from outside. However, medium level achieving schools need a certain level of support of this kind. But, successful schools do not need it since they have already founded their support system for their effectiveness (Hopkins, Harris, & Jackson, 1997).

### Criticism towards School Improvement Practices

Since the mid-1990's, in spite of the drastic increase in the educational reform efforts in many OECD countries, it seems that the effects of these reforms on students' overall achievement level are not as expected (Clarke et al., 2004; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001). What should be argued is whether the overall achievement level improved to a large extent in the last 30 years in the countries such as United States and Britain where SI practices are conducted extensively (Coe, 2009). Unlike the educational reform attempts in the States for the last 40 years, the reading test results in nation-wide evaluations (NAEP) have not showed almost any change. In spite of some proof on the fact that the distance between socially-advantaged and disadvantaged ones are getting a little bit closer, this situation is limited to primary school level. Despite all the reform attempts since 1980's, overall achievement level has always been the same (Townsend, 2011).

On the other hand, the methods use in SI research have also been criticized. In these research, the findings gathered from frequently preferred case studies could not be developed, and their validity and usefulness have been limited (Hallinger & Heck, 2011). As a result, it can be concluded that for years, SI has focused on the cycle around the existing schools, and mostly revealed inconsistent and rare success (Elmore, 2004).

### Aim of the Study

In parallel with the rapid change, the increasing demands for change in schools have been more and more complicated. Principals are expected to improve their schools by meeting these demands. In this sense, the aim of this study is to identify primary school principals' views on school improvement, to determine what they do to improve their schools and to reveal the reasons why they cannot do what they want to do. The study addresses the following questions:

1. According to the principals, what should be done for SI?
2. What do the principals do to improve their schools or the instructional process?
3. What are the practices that the principals want to but cannot do for SI?
4. What are the reasons why the principals cannot do what they want to do?
5. Do the principals have school improvement plans or projects that they implement for SI? If they have, what type of projects or plans are they?

### Method

#### Research Model

This study is a descriptive research that used qualitative data. The data were gathered through semi-structured questions. In this way, it aimed to identify the participants' experiences, views and feelings.

#### Participants

The data were collected from the primary school principals in the Karabağlar district of İzmir. It was aimed to reach the principals of all 48 schools in the district and therefore, there was no sampling. Among the principals participated in the study, 40 of the participants completed all the items in the survey, but 3 of them did not complete the whole survey; hence, 37 of the surveys were accepted as valid.

#### Data Gathering Instrument

For the purposes of the study, an "SI Improvement Survey" was developed. It included nine questions. The four questions in the first part of the survey aimed at identifying seniority of principals, length

of being a principal, socio-economic status of the school environment and overall achievement level of the schools. The five questions in the second part are the semi-structured questions towards the problems of the study. For the 'validity' of the survey, both school principals' and experts' opinions and suggestions were taken into consideration. It was then piloted.

#### Data Gathering

The data were gathered by the researcher in April, 2010. The instrument was distributed to the principals and aims of the study were explained in order for them to answer sincerely and truly. On an appointed day, the survey forms were collected.

#### Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on 'open coding', 'axial coding' and 'selective coding' which are the three basic steps in Strauss and Corbin's (1998) approach to theory development. The coding was conducted according to the steps which included finding the themes, reorganizing the data based on the themes and codes, and interpreting the findings. Because of the uniqueness of qualitative research, a flexible approach was used. At first, the coding was done by categorizing the statements with temporary theme titles based on their similarities. Later, the coded statements were examined; reorganized based on their similarities and differences; unrelated ones were excluded. At last, the number of participants and the frequency of statements were taken into consideration carefully and the themes were finalized. The categories were explained along with the statements from the participants. For the quotations, a number was assigned to each principal with the SES of the school near it (e.g. M15, low SES). The frequencies across the categories were quantified. With frequency analysis, it was aimed to better understand the area in which the analyzed items or elements were intensified (Bilgin, 2000; Martinmäki & Rusko, 2008). The quantification of the qualitative data with frequency analysis was done not to make generalizations, but to enhance reliability, reduce bias and make comparisons across the categories. In data analysis, some of the principals' statements were categorized under more than one theme. Therefore, the total frequencies, number of participants and rates exceed one hundred percent.

## Findings

### The practices that should be implemented to improve the school

According to the principals, the practices that should be implemented for SI are listed as: “enhancing cooperation and communication” (n=10, 27,0%) “promoting teachers’ professional development” (n=9, 24,3%); “meeting staff needs” (n=9, 24,3%); “improving physical environment” (n=8, 21,6%); “providing educational technology and enhancing its use” (n=8, 21,6%); “providing financial support for the school” (n=7, 18,9%); “good planning” (n=6, 16,2%); “improving principal qualifications” (n=6, 16,2%); “creating a positive school environment” (n=5, 13,5%); “giving principals more authority and reducing the intervention of bureaucracy to education” (n=4, 10,8%); “seeking better instructional methods” (n=4, %10,8); “guiding parents” (n=4, 10,8%); “reducing class sizes and providing full time schooling (not in morning or afternoon shifts) (n=4, 10,8%).

### The practices that are implemented to improve the school

The practices that are implemented by the principals to improve their schools are “supplying, and promoting the use of, technological equipment” (n=11, 29,7%), “enhancing communication” (n=10, 27,0%), “improving physical environment” (n=9, 24,3%), “organizing training sessions for parents” (n=7, 18,9%), “opening a course to prepare students for the placement test” (n=7, 18,9%), “planning development” (n=5, 13,51%). Other practices include “promoting teacher development”, “organizing social events”, “developing a democratic perception at”, “trying to apply the curriculum”, and “inspecting the lessons”.

### What principals want to, but cannot do to improve their schools

What the principals participated in the study want to, but cannot do to improve their schools because of various reasons include “improving physical conditions” (n=11, 29,7%); “making use of educational technology more” (n=8, 21,6%); “mitigating the lack of staff” (n=5, 10,8%); “increasing the success level”, “promoting the contribution and participation of parents”, “providing a suitable environment for cooperation” and “reducing class sizes” (n=2, 5,4%). Other practices also stated by the principals are “teachers’ professional development”, “acting as

an educational leader”, “implementing single-shift schooling” and “retiring elderly teachers from the profession”. Above all, only one principal from a high socioeconomic status area stated that he could implement all the practices he planned.

### The reasons why principals cannot do what they want

The reasons why the principals cannot do what they want to do are “lack of funds, financial problems” (n=20, 54,1%); “insufficient physical space” (n=6, 16%); “lack of staff” (n=5, 13,5%); “bureaucratic obstacles”, “teachers’ qualifications” and “lack of sufficient contribution of the school environment” (n=3, 8,1%). Furthermore, among the reasons why he cannot do what he wants, one principal complained of “the change of principals frequently”.

### Principals’ school improvement plans or projects

18 (48,6%) of the 37 principals participated in the study do not implement an improvement plan or project. The instructional activities at these 18 schools are carried out in an ordinary way. 19 schools (51,4%) have an SI plan or project that is implemented. These projects include improving physical conditions, equipping the school with educational technology, enhancing success, organizing, social, cultural, and sports events. Besides, some principals take part in the projects of the provincial directorate of national education which are funded by the European Union.

## Discussion and Suggestions

The present study aimed at identifying the primary school principals’ views on SI and what they do for it, and to reveal the reasons why they cannot do what they plan.

Based on the results revealed for the first problem of the study, the practices that should be implemented can be divided to two parts: the ones that should be done by “the central administration- bureaucratic structure” and by “the school principals”. However, it is not a clear-cut differentiation since both can be important in the implementation of some of these practices.

Considering the current structure of the education system, the authority and resources that the principals have, it can be said that it becomes a necessity for improvement practices to be implemented by the central-bureaucratic structure. These include;

improving physical environment, providing educational technology, teacher training and development, providing financial support, reducing class sizes and full-day teaching, increasing principals' power, reducing the interference of bureaucracy, and meeting staff needs. These strategies suggest that if the individual reform attempts are not supported by the system, they won't yield desired results (Nehring & O'Brien, 2012). On the other hand, what school principals can do may be listed as improving cooperation and communication at school, creating a good SI plan, training parents about teaching and learner development, seeking better instructional methods, providing a positive school atmosphere meaning that ruling the school democratically and being open to new ideas. By the help of this type of strategies, the principals can enhance the quality of education and create the necessary conditions to improve students' and teachers' learning capacity. So, the school capacity can be improved and the principals can play a key role (Harris & Lambert, 2003; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Penlington et al., 2008).

The first three practices that the principals use for SI are, respectively, "providing educational technology and increasing its use", "enhancing communication" and "improving physical conditions". These findings showed that for SI, the principals made an effort to update classroom tools and enhance the use of educational technologies, and improve the physical conditions of the schools.

The principals emphasized the importance of setting up an open and flexible communication environment including all the stakeholders in a warm and sincere atmosphere at school. Such an environment would foster commitment and dedication to school. For this reason, school leaders, by sharing the leadership, should create a school atmosphere in which others also take responsibility in reform and change process (Harris, 2011; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Heck & Hallinger, 2010; Penlington et al., 2008).

What the principals want to, but cannot do for SI mostly include "improving physical conditions", "making use of educational technology as much as possible" and "mitigating the lack of staff". Besides, although 'teacher development' has been the second in the list about should be done, it is the fifth and the last in the list of which principals' want, but cannot do. However, teacher development is one of the crucial conditions for SI, and without one these conditions, the rest wouldn't be successful (Fullan, 1992). On the other hand, what principles in Tur-

key can do for teachers to take in-service training is quite limited in terms of both their power and the financial matters. However, time for teachers to develop themselves should be created, their development should be observed and evaluated. For the sustainability of the development, learning and development should be shared, and people who develop themselves should be appreciated (Bubb & Earley, 2009). What should not be forgotten is that although something beneficial for teachers' development can also be considered as beneficial for student learning, it could be misleading to think that every problem can be solved by professional development. The reason is that in order for a school to be successful, all the standards set for both teacher and student success should be met (Vandenberghe, 2002).

The reasons why the principals cannot do what they want to do are "lack of funds, financial problems"; "insufficient physical space"; "lack of staff"; "bureaucratic obstacles"; "teachers' qualifications" and "lack of sufficient contribution of the school environment". These were mostly related to financial and bureaucratic factors that stem from the education system and its nature. School principals' do not obtain adequate contribution to school because of the effects of low or middle socio-economic level of the school's environment. This situation shows the need for schools to be rescued from being dependent on the parents financial contributions that they require also thought to lead to the deepening of existing inequalities between schools.

Thus, when socio-economic level of schools raised, the amount of income obtained through parent-teacher associations, and their students' test results from Turkish, Mathematics, Science, and Technology lessons increased (Özdemir, 2011). The reason for school principals' that they can't obtain adequate contributions to their schools is determined as the effects of low or middle socio-economic level of the schools' environment. Besides, although the schools which take place in lower socio-economic environment necessarily operate the surrounding resource obtained directly to the compulsory expenses but the schools take place in a medium socio-economic level environment operate resources to the compulsory expenses as well as to improve the quality of education. Moreover, the schools which take place in high socio-economic level environment operate resources to improve the quality of education only, because their compulsory expenses had been provided (Yolcu, 2011).

One of the reasons for principals' not achieving their plans for SI is not being able to develop teachers' quality. There is no doubt that one of the most important factors for the quality of education is the teachers' quality. The reason is that effective learning is not an automatic activity but is seen as the product of an influential learning context created by a skillful teacher. This type of learning and teaching activities is anticipated to be in an environment with higher expectation, cooperation and an innovative attitude (Açıkgöz, 2002; Hopkins, West, & Ainscow, 1996). Therefore, teachers need to change their teaching practices, which makes it a requirement to provide teachers intensive and continuous support. In order for the principals to do all these, they need to form a new culture by creating a transformation in the learning culture and improving the relations between all the individuals and groups at schools (Fullan, 2002).

As for the final problem of the study, it was determined that almost half of the principals didn't have a development plan or project towards school improvement. The existing SI plans and projects mostly included practices related to improvement of physical structure and equipping the school with technology. At schools located in a middle-high socio-economic status (SES) environment, it was observed that with the contribution by parents, classrooms were equipped with air conditioners, computer, projector, Internet, and the school building had necessary repairments. However, principals at schools of low SES areas stated that they did not get the desired contribution from the parents. At this point, as stated by Apple (2004), it can be said that SI practices may cause larger distances among schools and inequalities in education.

As a result, it is seen that half of the principals made an effort to improve their schools and others did not conduct any practices beyond the routine of school mechanism. As argued by the principles, it is thought to be connected with bureaucratic centralist structure of the Turkish education system and the limitations it brings, such as the use of financial sources, deciding on teaching times, staff assignment and syllabus selection. Schools almost have no independence. For that reason, there is a need for a comprehensive and consistent approach to make schools more effective and enhance the quality in education. To meet this need, central management aims and policy should be identified, its guidance and inspections functions should be fulfilled, and more independence and financial support should be given to schools. Moreover, ef-

forts to develop teacher quality should be made. On the other hand, principals need to create a long-term improvement strategy, empower the communication between the school and the environment, make all the stakeholders at schools play a role and take responsibility in the change process, inform the individuals and groups concerned and act as a leader.

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