

**A Case Study of Teachers' Views on
New First Grade Curriculum Implementation in Turkey**

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Abstract

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of the implantation of a new first grade policy based on the new Turkish education standards during the 2012-2013 academic year. The study was based on a phenomenological case study design utilizing a structured interview protocol. Ten teachers discussed opportunities and challenges of implementing the new standards in the first year. Data were collected at the end of June 2013 using a purposeful, snowball sampling technique. To ensure verification of the interpretations, member checking was used. A thematic analysis was performed once interview responses were transcribed. We discovered that differences in implementation at the school-level caused differences in teachers' views of the standards. Further, teachers experienced challenges related to whether students had kindergarten education or not and students' school readiness was a central issue.

Keywords: Teachers' perceptions, first grade curriculum, 4+4+4 educational model, first grade starting age, adoption period, primary education.

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Along with theoretical and technological developments, educational systems and opportunities have evolved over time. However, one area that has remained consistent is the dedication to improve the quality of education. Education is one of the most important factors that profoundly affect the lives of human beings, not only at an individual-level but also at the country-level. Although the approach used in each country may vary, there is a common goal: to improve the quality of education.

In this study, we have investigated the implementation of a new curriculum and standards for first graders in Turkey. This article begins with an introduction of the Turkish educational system, including the new curriculum, a brief review of children's rights and readiness for school, and teachers' perspectives. The methods section details the study design and how we analyzed the data. In the following sections, we present the results, conclusions, and discussion about this new curriculum.

The Turkish Educational System

The focus of this study is the first year of implementing a new policy for first graders in Turkey. To understand the context of this transition, we provide a brief overview of the Turkish Educational System. The system includes optional pre-primary school, primary/elementary school, middle school, high school, and college/university. The pre-primary level includes children between the ages of 3 to 5. Compulsory education begins at the primary/elementary school level and the middle school level, including ages 6-13. Pre-primary education institutions may be established as independent kindergartens, as part of a primary school, or as practice classes affiliated with other education-related institutions. The objective of pre-primary

education is to ensure that children develop physically, mentally, and emotionally and acquire good habits that prepare them for compulsory primary education (MNESDP 2013).

The enrollment of students in compulsory education starts at the end of September when the child is 5 years old, and finishes at the end of the eight grade year when the child turns 13 (MNESDP 2013). In March 2012, the length of compulsory education in Turkey was increased from 8 to 12 years of education by the Ministry of National Education (MONE). Every citizen has the right to free public education for the duration of the compulsory education period. When children turn 5, they are automatically assigned to a primary school in their neighborhood; at this time, their parents check the school assignment their children are assigned to using e-school online system (MONE, n.d.).

Each level of education, primary, middle, and high school, is comprised of four years of schooling, totaling twelve years. As a result of the 2012 change in compulsory education, additional regulations regarding students' age have been put in place, such as the age for starting first grade which was decreased from 72 months (6 years old) to 66 months (5.5 years old) (MONE 2012). This change in the age for starting first grade provoked strong arguments among stakeholders, including scholars who reported that at the new starting age, younger students would not be prepared for the first grade curriculum (METU 2012; Ankara University 2012; Bosporus University 2012); other scholars requested to revoke or amend this age change implementation to enhance the quality of kindergarten education (Hacettepe University 2012; Ankara University 2012; Bosporus University 2012; Ege University 2012; METU 2012). The updated age requirements also brought with them a change in the curriculum which required a transition period. This a few month transition period took place at the beginning of fall semester to help first graders to adjust in the new curriculum.

Children's Readiness

It is widely understood that early childhood education has tremendous impacts on later educational attainment, not only in terms of children's cognitive and intellectual development but also in terms of their social development through collaboration with other children in non-familial activities (Archard, 2015). In addition, there is a moral argument that every child has the right to benefit from modern theoretical and practical approaches to education (Dwyer, 2003). Considering the children's rights, Smeyers and Wringe (2003) noted that education can be seen as a tool that empowers students to live worthwhile lives, rather than being passive recipients of information.

Readiness for school is often defined as aiding children to reach certain levels of mastery in skills or abilities that will help them to attain goals for their grade level, both academically and socially. Therefore, it is assumed that school readiness is not only related to children's experiences, but also to the contexts in which learning occurs.

Several views of school readiness have emerged at different times in the past (Muelle 2010): The maturationist view believes that a child becomes ready for school through his/her maturity alone; the approach holds that waiting is all that is necessary for children to become ready for school. A second view, the empiricist/environmentalist view, posits that the child's experiences in his/her early years influence his/her readiness to begin school. Additionally, the interactionist view sees both the environment and the institution as factors for school readiness. This latter approach has been influenced by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which suggests that the child's readiness is strongly associated by the child's environment (e.g., classrooms), as well as the readiness of the other children (Dagli and Jones 2013).

Due to the school eligibility cut-off age and the natural diversity of students' birthdays across the calendar year, classrooms will always have an oldest and youngest child. As such, the

influences, both positive and negative, of mixed ages on children's social and academic outcomes have been of interest to researchers for many years.

Past studies have shown that mixed age classrooms provide positive experiences for children, including more integrated play across ages and genders and more complex forms of group work in the classroom (Kutnick, Ota, and Berdondini 2008; Doherty 2012). Proponents of mixed age classrooms and social learning theorists focus on the benefits of mixed age classrooms, which indicate that younger children benefit from being exposed to older children and model their behaviour after the older children.

Furthermore, Tolmie, Topping, Christie, Donaldson, Howe, Jessiman, Livingstone, and Thurston (2010) pointed out that the reasons for mixed age students working efficiently might be attributed to the influence of older students, who might have better inherent group work skills, plus the willingness of younger members of the class to allow their older classmates to control collaborative activity. Therefore, it is not just group-work skills that matter, but the social dynamics of the context in which they are deployed.

In contrast, the advocates of single age classrooms expressed concern about age-appropriate curriculum and staff training for mixed-age classrooms. They also supported the theory offered by Piaget and others that interacting with peers who are close in age and ability will result in optimal learning (Moller, Forbes-Jones, and Hightower 2008). Huang and Invernizzi (2013) showed that young-for-grade students have lower literacy scores and a higher risk of retention compared to the high-end of the age group for a grade level.

At the neutral point, Bell, Greenfield and Bulotsky-Shearer (2013) found out that age mixing was not significantly associated with school readiness after examining associations

between age mixing and children's school readiness,. As can be seen, the body of evidence on school readiness and factors that influence it is less than conclusive.

Teachers' Perceptions

Having discussed children's readiness for school, it is time to view teacher's perceptions of the implantation of a new first grade policy. Central to this article, teachers occupy a vital role in education and the implementation of new curriculum and protocols. If a newly developed curriculum is to be effective, it should keep the teacher in mind, as teachers interpret and implement a curriculum based on their knowledge, beliefs and experiences (Ainsworth, Ortlieb, Cheek Jr, Simnacher Pate and Fetters 2012). Kesküla, Loogma, Kolka and Sau-Ek (2012) stressed that the teachers' adaptation to new policy regulations and curriculum vary from teacher to teacher and that teachers' attitudes toward the new regulations also changes over time. Even when educational reforms aim to change teaching practices for the better, the intertwined nature of teachers' knowledge, beliefs, emotions and cognitions can elicit reactions of resistance (Coenders, Terlouw, and Dijkstra 2008). Correspondingly, Huberman (1989) found that teacher anxiety and insecurity can be misinterpreted as resistance to change when using a new/updated curriculum (as cited in Ainsworth et al. 2012). In a phenomenological study using Van Manen's framework to study lived experiences, Margolis and Nagel (2006) concluded that without teacher buy-in, it would not be possible to have successful educational reform.

Overall, this case study focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of teachers' views regarding a change in the first grade curriculum which required a new transition period during the first three months of the school year in Turkey. The major research question was: how do teachers perceive the transition period of the new first grade curriculum?

Methodology

Research Design

The researchers chose a case study as the research design to study this phenomenon (Merriam 1988). Through this case study, the researchers aim was to determine teachers' reactions to the implementation of first grade curriculum with the new school starting age and transition period. This case analysis describes and interprets the teachers' responses to the new school starting age and transition period applications. One also may consider this case study as an investigation of the new implementation from the teachers' perspective. The researchers focused on understanding the teachers' experiences through the course of implementing the new requirements. This phenomenological approach allowed us to explore what participant teachers have in common as they adapted to the new curriculum. With this approach, the researchers assumed there is some commonality as to how individuals perceive and interpret similar experiences; consequently, we sought to find the shared experiences and explore what the impact of implementing the new curriculum on the teachers actually was.

Research Context

This study was conducted a city in Turkey during a two-week period in June 2013. This city is a growing industrial city in the southwestern part of Turkey, with a population of about 525,497 (Turkish Statistical Institute 2012). There are 76 public elementary schools in the city's central area (DNED, n. d.), all of which adhere to the standardized curriculum.

Participants

For this study, we used purposeful sampling strategy to select the participants because as Creswell (2007, 156) emphasized, by using purposeful sampling we had not only participants who provided diverse and detailed insight consistent with our case, but also participants who

showed maximum variation in terms of their experiences. To gain entry to the research setting, one of the researchers visited the National Education Directorate of the city to request permission to interview teachers and obtain referrals using a snowball technique.

The sample included 10 first grade teachers, 6 males and 4 females, in the aforementioned city. Selection criteria included individuals who taught first grade during the 2012-2013 academic year and taught first grade for more than one academic year. This sample met the essential criteria for a phenomenological study, as the individuals had “experience of the phenomenon being studied” (Creswell 2007, 128). Teaching experiences varied from 16 years to 32 years, and their first grade teaching experiences varied from 4 to 12 academic years.

Data Collection

To capture the lived experiences of the participants as detailed as possible, we conducted semi-structured interviews using an interview protocol; the protocol developed by the researchers consists of thirteen questions and was approved by an institutional review board in the US prior to implementation. Three questions specifically referred to gender, teaching experiences and first grade teaching experiences.

The structured questions were used to gather teachers’ views on the implementation. The interviewer asked the same questions to all participants in the same order; in addition, the interviewer followed up the participants’ answers with probing questions to obtain more detailed information regarding the teachers’ experiences.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed verbally that they may terminate the interview at any time and their identity would not be released. Researchers attempted to conduct the interviews at a place where teachers felt comfortable and at ease. In this case, each interview was conducted in a school setting with many taking place in the teacher’s

own classroom. While none of the participants consented to a tape-recorded interview, the interviewer attempted to note every word that the participants spoke. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. After each interview, the interviewer reviewed her notes and transcribed each word clearly. All of the interviewer's notes were taken in Turkish.

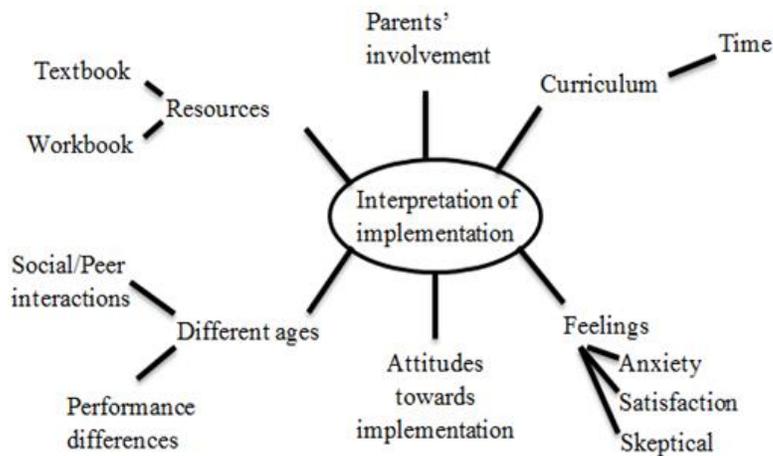
The researchers reviewed all notes after transcribing the interviews to assure accuracy; further, member checking was implemented during the interviews as another measure to assure accuracy.

Data Analysis

Teachers' responses were translated from Turkish to English by one of the researchers. A second translator was given the same transcripts in Turkish to check if the English translations were accurate. Once accuracy was confirmed, data were independently clustered into meaningful codes and themes and a cross analysis technique was used. A total of 72 codes emerged from the data.

Researchers individually and independently clustered all the codes into meaningful themes and compared each individual theme to determine a set of categories using a cross analysis technique. Analysis of the teachers' interviews generated a variety of themes, several of which overlapped. However, researchers discussed each theme until consensus was reached and the themes were integrated into appropriate categories. Seven categories and eight subcategories were identified from common teachers' perceptions, shown in figure 1. Surprisingly, one category (interpretation of implementation) was found to be protruding and changing teachers' perceptions by itself for other categories and subcategories; this category is articulated in the first section under results.

Figure 1. Data categories



Results

As mentioned previously, seven categories were identified from teachers’ responses; the findings are summarized below.

Interpretation of Implementation

The teachers at the three schools where this study was conducted each had a different interpretation of implementation. For instance, before the new school year began, one of the three schools’ administrators and teachers decided to separate the first grade classes according to the age of registered students. They therefore created three different age-groups in the first grade classrooms: 60-66 month-old students, 66-72 month-old students and 72-80 month-old students. Conversely, the other two schools’ administrators and teachers decided to educate mixed age-group students, of 60 to 84 month-old, in the same classrooms; for this reason, teachers who had mixed age groups of 60 to 84 month-old students in the same classroom stated that they followed these implementations differently (T5). The interviews revealed that there was not much consistency in implementation among the teachers, which resulted in varying degrees of ease or difficulty for the teachers during the 2012-2013 school year.

Curriculum

All of the interviewees stated that there was not any curricula change for any course of the first grade with this implementation. Teachers mentioned that they continued to utilize the same first grade curricula that they were using prior to this implementation. However, the time available to implement the curriculum was shortened. The differences between the new and former curricula included a three-month adaptation period and new play and activity subjects in place of a physical activity subject. For the adaptation period, teachers indicated that students generally learned school rules and social norms (through getting to know each other) through practice to improve their skills for class activities and games. As one of the teachers stated:

“There was not any change in the curricula. We had an adaptation period. First three months adaptation period was largely about games and improving students’ manipulative skills. ..., there were activities to improve students’ language skills, friendship skills, understanding school culture and class rules (T10).”

Teachers acknowledged that the scope of the first grade curricula was appropriate for the older students, while the scope of the adaptation period was appropriate for the younger students. With the three month adaptation period, the time available to carry out the full first-grade curricula was shortened; for this reason, some teachers, who taught younger students, did not carry out all of the adaptation period exercises and compensated by shortening the adaption period.

Resources

According to the participants, aside from the adaptation period and use of an additional workbook, the schools reported no change to apply this implementation. Teachers expressed that schools did not make any accommodations for the younger students in the classrooms or

playgrounds; one teacher mentioned that the lack of physical space in the classroom made it inconvenient to use the workbook for games (T2).

Interviewees were very positive about these adaptation period exercises, stating that it allowed students time to become familiar with the system, especially those students who did not attend kindergarten. Conversely, some teachers stated that this workbook was not attractive for older students, especially those who attended kindergarten as they had studied the same kinds of exercises prior to enrolling in first grade. While the Ministry of National Education had sent the same first grade textbooks that are traditionally used, teachers stated that because of the presence of different age groups, the textbooks became inappropriate for all of the students in the class, especially for younger ones.

Different Ages

Having different ages in the classroom yielded differences in social/peer interactions and the in-class performance of students. For instance, teachers observed that younger students brought a specific cultural etiquette norm into the classroom. In Turkey, cultural etiquette requires younger individuals to address older individuals as ‘*abla*’ or ‘*abi*,’ which mean elder sister and elder brother in English, respectively. The terms are added after the names of the older individuals if they are close friends or relatives. Teachers noted that younger students included these cultural custom words when addressing older classmates and these older students became dominant over younger ones in the classrooms (T10). Teachers also explained that students exhibited a tendency of playing with the students of their age.

Furthermore, teachers who had mixed-age students in their classrooms observed that younger students performed poorer than older students. They also noted that while younger students were eager to learn reading and writing, they struggled more to fulfill the requirements

of the first grade curricula and lagged behind the older students in terms of understanding and expressing themselves.

Parents' Involvement

Teachers found parents' involvement in their children's education was either beneficial or detrimental. Some teachers communicated that parents were very supportive and put a lot of effort to help their children learn to read, write, and gain grade-level skills. More specifically, it was determined that if parents were supportive of their children and put in the effort to help the children, the students learned how to read and write despite their age (T4). On the other hand, other teachers felt pressured from parents regarding their students' success; these teachers explained that since parents were aware that schools interpreted the implementations differently, they often intervened profoundly.

Feelings

All of the teachers felt anxious at the beginning of the school year for reasons such as the new school starting age, inadequate in-service training, no curricula change, inadequate time period for the curriculum, number of younger age students in class, the variance in students' age range, and younger students' ability or inability to deal with the first grade requirements. As a specific example, one of the teachers stated that s/he was worried about whether younger students could go to restroom themselves, would listen to the lecture in class or could do their homework (T9).

Although the current study found that the main source of anxiety was whether students would be able to adequately learn how to read and write, teachers were ultimately satisfied with students' achievements because, in the end, students learned how to read and write (T4). It is important to note that the interviews also revealed that teachers were skeptical about students'

future achievements; they indicated a worry that younger students might encounter reading and writing problems at the beginning of the second grade more than older students.

Attitude Towards Implementation

Five teachers out of ten seemed positive about the new implementation; while the others expressed criticism towards the curricula. For teachers, it is very important that the textbooks and contents should be simplified with the new system (T6).

Conclusions

The findings indicated that teachers' experiences of the transition period to the new implementation were related to: (i) school readiness of children entering first grade and (ii) teachers' views of the transition.

Because the Turkish education system is centralized, any change has to be approved by central authorities and then applied in all schools. While the major policy change implemented by the central authorities included a younger starting age for first grade students, our findings determined that the major impact on teachers was the three-month adaptation period. We can infer that the purpose of the adaptation period was to mitigate the challenges of the transition to first grade for younger students as it is highly unlikely that these students attended kindergarten. As a result, some teachers found this period very helpful in improving the physical development of the students who did not attend kindergarten. On the other hand, some teachers indicated that the adaptation period was not helpful for all students as some students had practiced the same kind of activities when they were in the kindergarten.

Teachers reported their expectations of the adaptation period as preparing students to take care of themselves, follow basic rules and routines, sustain attention, and handle the reading, writing, and mathematics practices of first grade.

One of the intriguing questions for future research that arose from this study was: If a child enters school at a younger age, will his/her development be hindered throughout their school career or will s/he catch up with the older classmates? From the study, the researchers discovered that some teachers doubted that their younger age students would be able to catch up with their older classmates, even in higher grades. The reason the teachers pointed out was that older students attended kindergarten and started the first grade with the advantage of having acquired the abilities and knowledge necessary for the next grade. The underlying cause of these teachers' insights may be, as some teachers stated, the younger students performed activities more poorly than older students. To the contrary, some teachers maintained that their students acquired the skills necessary for first grade as expected, even despite their age. This controversy should be investigated further; yet, it is imperative to note that the teachers who were skeptical about students' future success had mixed age group students.

Another reason the teachers' thought that students would not be ready for the next grade might have stemmed from the teachers' discovery that the first grade curricula was not rearranged to flow from December to June. With the three-month adaptation period, the time for completing the curricula had to be shortened. This situation forced teachers to teach reading and writing in a shortened time period and put a great deal of pressure on them. As a consequence, teachers expect some regulations to be made to amend the status quo.

Further, we discovered that schools did not make arrangements to have younger age students in classrooms or play grounds; consequently, there was lack of infrastructure and

materials in schools. As recounted by the teachers, the use of the workbook was appropriate for younger students, whereas the textbooks were more appropriate for older students. Moreover, age differences among students revealed different peer interactions. Younger students brought cultural etiquettes into classrooms by calling older students “elder brother” or “elder sister.” Parents also worried about their children’s education.

As it is expressed before, due to this new system, some younger students did not attend kindergarten. Teachers were not clear whether the students’ age impacted their development and skill attainment or whether it was due to innate ability. The question of whether age makes a difference to a child’s development and skill attainment needs to be further studied. Additionally, it is important to note that interviewed teachers strongly emphasized the importance of kindergarten to children’s development, not the child’s age when they start first grade. As a future direction, the new implementation might be investigated by repeating the study with school administrators.

Limitations

One limitation of the current study was not using a tape recorder during the interviews; as a consequence, the interviewer had to write down everything the teachers said. Another possible limitation was that interviews were conducted in Turkish, but the analysis was completed using the translated English transcripts. It is not the intent of qualitative research to generalize results, but instead to produce a replicable study.

Implications

Some of the implications of the current study include developing a better understanding of this phenomenon through teachers’ voices. Concurrent with Ainsworth and colleagues (2012), the effectiveness of a curriculum depends on teacher’s input and knowledge since they are the

enablers and facilitators of learning. As teachers revealed in this study, the new school starting age is affecting the teaching and learning environment, as well as students' learning. Teachers' voices, if heard, can add richness to the implementation. If not, the risk may be that without teacher's input, students may not develop skills and knowledge and as a result they may be disadvantaged through higher grades. Understanding teachers' lived experiences is critical to address strengths and challenges and create opportunities to learn from the experiences.

Despite the fact that in our study some teachers remain skeptical about students' future achievements, the results of Black et al. (2011) indicated that the long-term effects of school starting age on in-school tests seem modest. Even though Altwicker and Kollo (2012) found that students generally gain from starting school later, differences between younger and older students were most probably explained by the relative efficiency of families and kindergartens. These other studies are in alignment with the results of the current study, which found that with parents' support students achieved the first grade requirements even if they were younger. In addition, Avraamova (2014) also found out that parents exhibit a high degree of control over their children's academic progress by helping first-grade children complete their homework every day.

After all these disputes regarding the new implementation of students' school starting age, it is imperative to point out the results of Elder and Lubotsky's (2008) research which stated that if the goal of a policy is to raise the student achievement by focusing solely on entrance ages it is likely to fail; however, policy debates also must ask what children will be doing if not in school. In addition, the current study concluded that simply being in school does not improve achievement if there are not any age and grade appropriate settings. Therefore, based on the results of this study, the researchers recommend that it is important to create classrooms for a

cohort of younger students and to provide them appropriate materials and settings to support their successful completion of first grade.

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