

# A Comparative Investigation of the Previous and New Secondary History Curriculum: The Issues of the Definition of the Aims and Objectives and the Selection of Curriculum Content\*

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## Abstract

Discussions on history teaching in Turkey indicate that the previous versions of the history curriculum and the pedagogy of history in the country bear many problems and deficiencies. The problems of Turkish history curriculum mainly arise from the perspectives it takes and the selection of its content. Since 2003, there have been extensive educational changes, including the alterations of primary social studies and secondary history curricula. The major goal of the preparation and projected practice of the new history curriculum is to overcome the problems and deficiencies of history teaching. This paper examines the documents of the new Turkish secondary school history curriculum and compares it with the previous state of history teaching in the country. A qualitative document analysis technique was employed to descriptively examine the content of the curriculum documents. It has been found out that most of the problems and deficiencies observed in the previous versions have still been existent in the current one.

## Key Words

History Teaching, History Curriculum, Aims and Objectives of History Teaching, History Curriculum Content.

There has been a radical change that can be observed in Turkish Education since 2003. These changes have been evaluated as a decisive shift from traditional-behavioristic educational approach to

modern-constructivist education. Adopting constructivism as its main educational approach, the Ministry of National Education (MONE) planned to renew the whole of primary and secondary school curricula. The related branches of the ministry first set the basic principles for the formation of the new curricula. Then, the new curricula for lower-primary education (grade one to five) prepared and started to be practiced in 2004-2005 academic year. The new curricula for the remaining grades of primary and secondary education have been completed and started to be practiced in recent years.

Among all other school subjects, history and social studies curricula have been in a process of change in Turkey. The place of these two courses in primary and secondary schooling was preserved, but the time allocated to them in weekly school programmes and their content were changed. Apart from the general matters behind the initiation the overall change of Turkish school curriculum, there have been problems and deficiencies of history curriculum and its practice in schools. These prob-

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lems and deficiencies made the curriculum change necessary and urgent. As a school subject, history has been taught in Turkish schools since the second half of the 19th Century. Since then, there have been many attempts for discussing its problems related to policy and practice, some of which led to the alterations of history curricula and textbooks within the period of time.

Scrutinizing the relevant literature reveals that most of the works on history teaching have been devoted to the content of history textbooks. There are a few studies on teaching practice mostly focusing on the proceedings of history lessons. In Turkish contexts, textbooks have been used not only as the sole reference of history teaching, but also as a simplified version of the curriculum (Dinç, 2006; Ertürk, 1998; Kabapınar, 1992, 1998; Kaplan, 1999; Slater, 1995; Tunçay, 1998). Therefore, works dealing with the content of history textbooks can be categorized with those discussing the history curriculum.

According to the relevant literature, prior to the latest curriculum change the main problems of history teaching in Turkey were nationalistic and ethnocentric approaches, detailed and extensive content knowledge, lack of balance amongst various dimensions of history and the censorship against contemporary history. Firstly, some authors argued that the previous Turkish History Curriculum possessed a nationalistic and ethnocentric approach (Behar, 1996; Copeaux, 1998; Millas, 1998). The Turkish curriculum was criticized as aiming to inculcate particular socio-political or ideological perspectives (Dinç, 2001) and to introduce a nationalistic version of history through its content and the aims and objectives it presents (Aydın, 2001; Dinç, 2006; Özbaran, 1997; Tekeli, 1998). It was also claimed that the aims and objectives introduced in the previous versions of the curriculum are neither clear, understandable or achievable nor appropriate to practice in the classrooms (Dinç, 2006).

Secondly, some writers stated that the curriculum mainly concentrated on Turkish national history, which did not give pupils the necessary chances to study local history, European history and world history in a (Dilek, 1999; Dinç, 2006; Kabapınar, 1998; Kaya, Kahyaoglu, Çetiner, Öztürk, & Eren, 2001).

Thirdly, the literature indicates that the main focus of the previous Turkish curriculum was political history (Kabapınar, 1998; Üçyiğit, 1977). The presentation of the various dimensions of history in the curriculum and textbooks did also not have any coherence, because all those dimensions were in-

roduced as separate study units (Kaya et al., 2001; Tekeli, 1998).

Fourthly, studies on Turkish history teaching clarified that the former version of the curriculum was very selective in choosing the content from various periods of history (Arıkan, 1998; Yıldırım, 1998). Some authors underline the lack of contemporary history in the curriculum (Arslan, 1998; Dilek, 1999; Kabapınar, 1998; Orhonlu, 1998; Silier, 2003). Therefore, despite being keen to study, pupils might not have any chance to learn contemporary history through their secondary education in the Turkish, European or world contexts (Tekeli, 1998).

The other problems of the previous versions history curriculum were defined as the introduction of extensive and detailed historical content knowledge (Dilek, 1999; Kabapınar, 1998; Özbaran, 1998), the reintroduction of the same topics at several times throughout the various stages of schooling (Aktekin, 2004; Dilek, 1999; Kabapınar, 2002) and the existence of the '*The Revolution History of Turkish Republic and Atatürkçülük*' course, which has still been a compulsory subject in primary, secondary and higher education levels (Dinç, 2001).

Apart from the above mentioned problems arising from the construction and content of the curriculum, there were some pedagogical or practical problems of Turkish history education discussed in the relevant literature. The main problems associated with history teaching in Turkish classrooms could be described as: lack of resources and course materials, the traditional-behavioristic approaches of teaching based on rote learning and memorization making pupils passive in their learning, the lack of teaching methods and strategies, limited ways of assessment and the centralized nationwide university entrance exam (Demircioğlu, 1999; Dilek, 1999; Dinç, 2006; Kabapınar, 1998; Kaya et al., 2001; Orhonlu, 1998; Silier, 2003; Tanrıöğen, 1998; Tekeli, 1998).

## Method

This study is based on the examination of history curriculum and other related official documents. The previous and new versions of secondary history curriculum are examined in this study (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 1983, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). However, the curriculum documents of the Revolution History of Turkish Republic and the Principles of Atatürk and the optional history courses are excluded from the study, because they have not been revised or published yet.

A descriptive content analysis tool was devised to analyze the curriculum documents. The previous and new version of history curriculum are compared and contrasted according to the several criteria. The adopted educational approaches, the time and place allocated to history lessons, the aims and objectives of history teaching and the selection of curriculum content constitutes those criteria

### Results

It is stated in the secondary history curriculum that “political, social, economic and technological changes experienced in today’s world make the individuals and societies to face with various complex problems, which are also important for the improvement of the history curriculum” (MEB, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). The fundamental aim of the construction of the new curriculum is defined as “raising pupils as being sensitive to their past and developing a historical consciousness; reflecting the contemporary changes in teaching and learning approaches as well as taking the new teaching strategies, methods and techniques into account; and considering the newly historical knowledge that has been produced in the recent decades” (MEB, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009).

Taking constructivism as its main educational approach the new curriculum gives importance to learn the ways of learning and focuses on developing pupils’ historical knowledge, concepts, values and skills through driving them to think, to search, to ask questions and to interact. In consideration with these matters the new curriculum designed to introduce the historical content in three basic categories. They are attainment targets, sample activities and explanations.

The examination of the new secondary school history curriculum and its comparison with the previous versions reveals these results. Firstly, all the students in secondary schooling have to take history courses for at least three years. Previously, there was not any history course in the grade ten of the vocational lycées. So, it can be claimed that the place of history in the Turkish secondary school curriculum has been made even stronger after the latest changes.

Secondly, a careful examination of the previous and new aims and objectives of history teaching reveals that most of them introduce similar meanings/ ideas. This indicates that the practicability of the

aims and objectives of the new curriculum could be a problem, because the old ones were criticized as being unclear, ambiguous, unachievable and not appropriate to be practiced in the classroom (Dinç, 2006). Besides, the new history curriculum does not provide a reasonable guidance and examples for teachers to transfer these aims and objectives to their daily lesson plans and practice. Therefore, it can be said that most of the problems that are mentioned in the critics of the aims and objectives of the previous Turkish history curriculum have still been existent in the new version. However, there are some improvements related to the aims and objectives of history teaching that can be observed in the new curriculum. Some of these improvements are the need for considering and studying various dimensions of history, emphasizing the place and importance of historical knowledge and skills while trying to be orientated in the contemporary world, and establishing relationship between history teaching and literacy.

Thirdly, the examination of the curriculum documents shows that the new curriculum mainly selects its content from the Turkish national history. Apart from the newly introduced Contemporary Turkish and World History course, the place reserved for European and world history is very limited. Besides, local history has not been mentioned in the new curriculum at all.

Fourthly, the data indicates that the weight of political history in the overall secondary history curriculum is reduced in comparison with the previous curriculum. However, the problems in respect of balancing various dimensions of history and making connections between them in local, national, European and world history contexts in the curriculum content still exist.

Fifthly, the examination of the curriculum documents reveals that regarding to the inclusion of different historical periods, the selection of curriculum content has been improved. As mentioned earlier the previous versions of the curriculum were criticized as not including the contemporary history (Arslan, 1998; Dilek, 1999; Kabapınar, 1998; Orhonlu, 1998; Silier, 2003). This defect has been eradicated with the introduction of the new Contemporary Turkish and World History course. Nevertheless, some of the other shortcomings of the previous versions in relation with the inclusion of the various historical periods are still there in the new curriculum.

### Discussion and Conclusion

It is argued that the new secondary history curriculum adopts constructivism as its educational approach (MEB, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). As an educational approach, constructivism envisages that teachers and pupils should have freedom in the classroom and they should be given roles in the construction of the curriculum. It also features the concepts of learning how to learn, learning by doing and experiencing, pupils constructing their own knowledge/information (Fensham, Gunstone, & White, 1994; MEB, 2005; Schunk, 2004). However, its perception and practice in Turkish context shows some peculiar characteristics (Dinç & Doğan, 2010). Firstly, the perspectives of teachers, pupils and other stakeholders were not taken into account properly during the process of curriculum construction. Secondly, while constructivism does not approve the understanding of a centralized curriculum (Schunk, 2004), the practice in Turkey shows opposite and unique characteristics.

Despite the fact that the new history curriculum possess above peculiarities, it also shows some characteristics of constructivism. For instance, it considers pupils personal and academic development. In order to develop pupils' conceptual understandings, values and skills, it aims to improve their pedagogical content knowledge, and encourage them to ask questions, to interrogate, to think, to do research and interact with their peers and teachers. Nevertheless, the curriculum still bears some problems in respect of its design and practicability. Besides, if we consider that many history teachers in the country have not got any clue about constructivism and some of them do not have a teaching certificate, it seems almost impossible to expect too much from the practice of the new curriculum.

The examination of the curriculum reveals that history preserves and strengthens its place in the overall secondary school curriculum. While, some of the aims and objectives of history teaching in the current curriculum are identical with the ones in the previous version, some of them are similar to the old ones. Alike the previous version, some of the aims and objectives of history teaching in the current curriculum are still possessing national and nationalistic characteristics (Aydın, 2001; Behar, 1996; Copeaux, 1998; Dinç, 2001; Millas, 1998; Özbaran, 1997; Tekeli, 1998), but the others are designed to prepare pupils as humanistic and peaceful human beings who are tolerant to other nations and cultures. This situation appears as a dilemma for teachers, because it seems a bit awkward

to raise pupils as humanistic, peaceful and tolerant personalities while inculcating them with national-nationalistic views and narratives at the same time.

The examination of the curriculum content reveals that compared to the previous ones, the current history curriculum shows improvements in some ways. However, some of the problems and deficiencies of the previous curriculum are still out there in the new version. Those continuing problems are the selection of curriculum content from various historical contexts (Aktekin, 2004; Dilek, 1999; Dinç, 2005, 2006; Kabapınar, 1998; Kaya et al., 2001; Safran, 2003), dimensions and periods (Arslan, 1998; Dilek, 1999; Kabapınar, 1998; Orhonlu, 1998; Silier, 2003).

As a final point, this study suggests that the process of history curriculum construction should be taken as a ongoing continuous process that must take the views of various stakeholders into account. The examination of history textbooks and investigation of history teachers, secondary school pupils and other stakeholders on the various aspects of the current curriculum and its practice are also seen necessary and urgent.

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