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Changing pedagogy: A comparative analysis of reform efforts in Uganda and Turkey

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CHAPTER: 7

Student-centred pedagogy in Turkey: Conceptualisations, interpretations and practices

ABSTRACT⁵

The purpose of this chapter is to explore recent curricular reforms aimed at advocating SCP in primary schools in Turkey. By using a case study approach, the chapter examines teacher views on SCP, classroom practices, and perceived challenges in implementation process. The study highlights some of the unintended consequences of SCP in Turkey (such as parental over-involvement in performance and research assignments), and discusses a number of issues that seemed to interfere with teachers' efforts to implement SCP. In line with similar studies in other parts of the world, teachers in Turkey appeared to be concerned with poor teacher training, large classes, materials scarcity, the examination system, parental opposition, and inadequate student responsiveness. The chapter suggests that instead of focusing on the 'problematization' of implementation process and, in particular, focusing on teachers, efforts should be made to develop and apply more structured alternative approaches. While considering promising pedagogical approaches elsewhere, such efforts should also draw more inspiration from Turkish educationalists and scholars in order to develop a more culturally responsive pedagogy, which better suits the social, economic and political realities of Turkish society.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the primary school curriculum in Turkey has been increasingly viewed as obsolete, and inadequate in preparing children with the competencies, abilities, skills and knowledge for the 21st century. The 'old' curriculum has been attacked for its perceived lack of relevance to current Turkish society, for fostering rote learning, and failing to support life-long learning. In a globalised, knowledge-based economy, in which knowledge is produced and modified with increasing speed, the future of individuals and societies is believed to depend on competencies to access, use and produce knowledge. Therefore, a new curricular and pedagogical approach based on constructivism was considered essential to improve the

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relevance of education to economy, democracy, and technology, and to educate modern, productive, and self-confident citizens. Such a paradigm shift was also viewed as a prerequisite for sustainable development and for improving the country's competitiveness (MONE, 2005a). Furthermore, as a candidate country for EU membership, adopting EU norms, standards, and educational perspectives has also been an important political motive (MONE, 2005b). Moreover, critics emphasized the influence of neoliberal policies on education (İnal, 2009), and argued that SCP is aimed at educating individuals for a liberal, capitalist economic system.

A new curriculum for primary schools was developed in 2004, piloted in 120 selected schools across Turkey and the nationwide implementation started in academic year 2005/06 (Educational Reform Initiative, 2005). Drawing on a broader study aimed at analysing recent curricular reforms in Turkey, this chapter seeks to examine the implementation of SCP in primary schools. The chapter first describes the basic tenets of SCP and overviews its diffusion around the world in the past decades. It then focuses on the case of Turkey, by outlining the rationale for SCP and by describing how the new pedagogical approach is conceptualised in the new curriculum. This leads into a presentation of the analysis of the data by focusing on teachers' views on the reform-oriented pedagogical approach, classroom practices and perceived challenges in implementing SCP.

2. Student-centred pedagogy: its origins and global diffusion

The so-called traditional teaching, which is distinguished by its expository form and narrative character, has been the most pervasive pedagogical model around the world. Critique of this model has been developed at different historical moments, and socio-economic and geographical contexts, with different political aims in mind, by various actors, such as critical pedagogues from developing countries (e.g. Freire), educationalists in the Western world (e.g. Rousseau, Dewey and Vygotsky) and international organisations involved in education (e.g. UNESCO and UNICEF). Traditional teaching has been criticised for relegating education to an act of depositing whereby teachers make deposits and students receive, memorise and repeat to the best of their efforts and capacities (Freire, 1996). Such practices have also been criticised for being ineffective and leading to the acquisition of skills of a lower taxonomic level (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004), for undermining

spontaneity and initiative among students (O'Sullivan, 2004), and for inhibiting creativity and critical thinking (Freire, 1996).

Early progressive movements proposing alternatives to the traditional teaching originated in the second half of the 1800s (Windschitl, 2002). In the following period, several other alternatives have been proposed, yet the current academic discourse is dominated by two competing approaches. These are structured teaching approaches and discovery-based approaches that are based on constructivism. Both approaches agree that knowledge acquisition is a constructive process; however, the former advocate structure and some directivity in supporting the learning process effectively in school environments. Although discovery-based approaches are typically contrasted with the traditional model, structured teaching is situated between traditional teaching and discovery-based instruction (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004).

The majority of pedagogical reforms in developing countries in the past decades (particularly since the 1990s) (Tabulawa, 2003) have been based on the rhetoric of constructivism, which is generally labelled as student-centred, child-centred, learner-centred approaches, or active learning. Constructivism is characterised by an underlying premise that learning is an active process in which learners are active sense makers who seek to build coherent and organised knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning together with others (Mayer, 2004). Constructivism is heavily grounded in psychology and social science research. It has developed over many years; however, its origins are based on the works of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey. Since the 1960s, research on constructivism has expanded substantially in the Western world, incorporating work on students' alternative conceptions, thinking and problem solving in various disciplinary domains, metacognition, and social and cultural influences on knowledge construction (Windschitl, 2002).

Constructivism is difficult to characterise since it is conceptualised differently by various groups of theorists depending on whether emphasis is on individual cognitive processes or the socio-construction of knowledge. The Piagetian perspective emphasises individual cognitive processes, and argues that individuals construct a personal reality based on their previous knowledge and new experiences. In this view, knowledge is viewed as an interaction between the environment and the individual (Piaget, 1971). Vygotsky, however, emphasizes social processes and views learning as an interactive and constructive activity in which both society and individuals play essential roles. According to this perspective, knowledge is constructed as a result of social interactions and then internalised by individuals

(Windschitl, 2002). Both perspectives highlight the importance of peer interaction and cooperation in stimulating children's learning (Dockett & Perry, 1996). However, cognitive constructivists emphasize how individuals create more sophisticated mental representations and problem-solving abilities by using tools, information resources, and input from other individuals, whereas social constructivists perceive learning as increasing one's ability to participate with others in meaningful activities (Wilson, 1996). Dewey, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of education as a powerful agent of social transformation. For him, the purpose of education was the intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development of the individual within a democratic society. He viewed learning as experiencing, arguing that all genuine education comes about through experience. His education model emphasizes individualised learning based on active engagement, discovery, inquiry, and empirical problem solving (Dewey, 1998).

The principles suggested by Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey provided a theoretical foundation for SCP. However, since there is no prescribed design for education practices, there are various interpretations and applications of SCP (Mayer, 2004; Gauthier & Dembele, 2004). Compared to the traditional model, SCP assumes changes in four areas: the nature of knowledge, the roles of students and teachers in learning processes, and classroom organisation. In the traditional model, the subject matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past (Dewey, 1998). Knowledge is viewed as static and defined by curriculum designers, experts, and teachers. Students still have a role in knowledge construction, since all mental activity is constructive. However, in traditional teaching there are weak acts of construction, which are more arbitrary, and only loosely connecting new information with existing ideas. SCP, on the other hand, aims to promote strong acts of construction through which students connect new information with existing ideas to form meaningful knowledge and integrate information across topics (Windschitl, 2002).

In this model, the most productive learning experiences are considered to take place when learning is relevant and meaningful to students. Hence, students' deeper engagement with their learning and assuming greater responsibilities within the process are deemed critical. At the same time, in SCP, students are given opportunities to draw on their own experiences and interpretations of the learning process. The teacher's role is redefined as that of motivating, facilitating and structuring students' own discovery and search for knowledge. Teachers are expected to know their students well and

identify their potentials so that they can provide supportive learning opportunities that are appropriate and challenging for their existing capacities. In the SCP model, learning environments are considered to be more participatory and democratic. Moreover, the physical arrangement of the classroom is organised in a way that allows for working together (Cuban, 1983; Schuh, 2004).

By the late twentieth century, SCP had been diffused across many developing countries; reforms couched in the rhetoric of SCP, student participation, or democracy in the classroom have become widespread (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). Currently, many curricular reforms in developing countries strive to advocate SCP in schools, including Tibet (Carney, 2008a), China (Ouyang, 2003), Taiwan (Yang et al., 2008), South Africa (Nykiel-Herbert, 2004), Botswana (Tabulawa, 2003), Namibia (O'Sullivan, 2004), Ethiopia (Serbessa, 2006), Tanzania (Barrett, 2007; Vavrus, 2009), Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010a; 2010b) Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador (de Baessa, 2002). Moreover, such pedagogical reforms have often been accompanied by a competency-based curriculum and continuous assessment (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Ryan, 1998).

The widespread adherence to SCP is explained from a variety of perspectives. Some authors argue that SCP has spread throughout the world because it was perceived as modern, progressive, and effective in improving learning achievements (Anderson-Levitt, 2008). It is also viewed as superior in preparing children and youth for the world of work. In current globalised knowledge economies, the business community places a premium on employees who think creatively, adapt flexibly to new work demands, identify and solve problems, and create complex products in cooperation with colleagues (Windschitl, 2002). These characteristics are assumed to be benefits of constructivist learning environments; consequently, the receptivity of SCP has increased in developing countries. Some others suggest that SCP has become increasingly preferred in developing countries which are making transition to democracy. SCP is appealing for these countries since it carries the promise of intellectual liberation and emancipation from traditional approaches that are considered oppressive (Nykiel-Herbert, 2004). Moreover, SCP is positively viewed in countries in sub-Saharan Africa because 'they were not entirely new ideas and were ambiguous enough to be seen as key vehicles for achieving not so much educational, as economic, social and political goals' (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008, p. 2).

A rather different view is proposed by Tabulawa (2003) who points to the power asymmetries among nations and argues that if pedagogical

practices are converging around the world (at least in the official curriculum), it is because a certain pedagogical approach is in the interests of powerful states or international organisations. Tabulawa (2003) highlights the role of international aid agencies in the diffusion of SCP in sub-Saharan Africa and in other low-income countries, as many have advocated for SCP as a prescription through educational projects and consultancies that were funded by them. Although aid agencies express their interest and preference for SCP in terms of its perceived effectiveness in improving learning outcomes, in essence, its efficacy lies in its political and ideological nature. In other words, SCP is promoted by international donor agencies for ideological purposes rather than for realising educational or pedagogical objectives. Tabulawa maintains that aid agencies have viewed pedagogy in technicist terms and displayed an apparent lack of interest for pedagogical issues until the early 1990s. However, they have become explicitly concerned with pedagogy since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and displayed an extraordinary interest in SCP due to its democratic tendencies and its perceived role in stimulating democratic social relations. According to the author, political democratisation has been viewed as a prerequisite for economic development, and education assumed a central role in the democratisation project. Therefore, Tabulawa argues that ‘the pedagogy is an ideological outlook; a worldview intended to develop a preferred kind of society and people. It is in this sense that it should be seen as representing a process of Westernization disguised as quality and effective teaching’ (Tabulawa, 2003, p. 7).

Likewise, Guthrie (1990) suggests that SCP reflects the norms of a liberal Western subculture and represents a process of Westernisation with its political and economic connotations. Yet, aid agencies disguise it as ‘better’ teaching. Additionally, Carney (2008a) agrees that SCP is part of an international agenda which aims to improve educational systems in ways that might support the spread of advanced capitalism and global democracy. As such, SCP might be viewed as a form of cultural imperialism.

3. SCP in Turkey

Although SCP became part of the official primary school curriculum in 2004, its origins go back to the early years of the Turkish Republic. In 1923, the Turkish Republic was proclaimed and the authorities initiated a series of comprehensive reforms to modernise the country, including the abolishment of the Caliphate, the establishment of the principle of secularism and the introduction of the Latin alphabet. Atatürk, the leader of the young Republic,

emphasized education in shaping a modern nation, and transforming its social, political, and economic structure. Schools were viewed as castles of the modern republic (Büyükdüvenci, 1995), and teachers as ‘the agents of change’ responsible for educating the new generations who were going to defend and protect the new republic (Sönmez, 2007). Therefore, teacher training was emphasized to train teachers who would embrace and follow the principles of the Atatürk Revolution (Uygun, 2008).

3.1. The Village Institutes

During the restructuring process, John Dewey, one of the most influential educationalists who contributed to the development of SCP, was invited to Turkey to examine the education system and make recommendations for its improvement. Dewey’s report pointed to low teacher status and low quality teacher education as the main problems of the Turkish education system. He provided extensive recommendations to improve teacher salaries and status, and to introduce ‘progressive’ pedagogical approaches. Dewey suggested that pedagogy courses should be given priority in teacher training institutes and a more life-oriented and democratic education system should be promoted (Uygun, 2008; Yılmaz, 2009). According to some experts, since the Turkish government wanted to establish a modern, secular national state, they wanted to use the ‘progressive’ education of Dewey to realise this aim (Biesta & Miedema, 1996). Others also confirm that Dewey was the first foreign scholar to be invited to the Turkish Republic since he was considered a pioneer of democratic and progressive education. His philosophy of education was thought to fit in with the democratic aims of the Turkish educational reform movement (Uygun, 2008). These accounts suggest that in addition to some other educational goals, ‘progressive pedagogy’ was also tried in Turkey in those years to advance democracy and Westernisation.

Inspired by Dewey’s educational ideas, the Village Institutes (Köy Enstitüleri) were established in the 1940s to transform the Turkish countryside, ameliorate poverty and ignorance among peasants, improve quality of life, and to help spread the nationalist ideology (Akyuz, 2009; Arayıcı, 1999). In these institutes, ‘education for work’ and ‘education for production’ were main motivations, and ‘learning by doing’ was one of the most highly emphasized principles. However, the Village Institutes soon became the major focus of political and ideological debate in Turkey. Most leftist oriented Kemalists perceived the institutes as the embodiment of Kemalist populism at its highest point, whereas several right-wing politicians

and intellectuals criticised them and made scapegoats for their political ambitions and anti-communist hysteria. Eventually, this progressive and unique experiment was abandoned in 1950 (Karaömerlioğlu, 1998). Sixty years since their closure, the controversy around the Village Institutes continues to be passionately debated in Turkey. The graduates have expressed a strong sense of belonging to the institutes and many have actively taken part in the intellectual life of the country, establishing associations, unions and publishing houses (Uygun, 2008).

3.2. The 'progressive pedagogy' in Curriculum 2004

The 'progressive' pedagogy became part of the official curriculum for primary schools in 2004, two years after the AKP came to power. The AKP emphasized education in the party programme and its leaders attempted to restructure the education system (İnal, 2009). The curriculum for primary schools was revised and changes were introduced to the content of the curriculum, the pedagogical approach and the assessment system (MONE, 2005a). The previous curriculum, which had not been substantially modified since 1968 (Güven & İscan, 2006), has been rigorously attacked for fostering rote learning and for overloading students with information that related poorly to their daily lives. In order to overcome such shortcomings, the content load has been reduced and thematically organised, and more emphasis has been put on the development and reinforcement of select competencies. Eight competencies are highlighted throughout the new educational programmes, including critical thinking, creativity, communication, problem solving, research, using information technologies, entrepreneurship, and language skills in Turkish (MONE, 2005a).

The revised curriculum adopts SCP as the pedagogical approach and recommends that the centre of all learning activities should be students. The new curriculum advocates increased student activity, diversity in teaching and learning methodologies, hands-on-learning, integration of learning activities in and outside school, cooperative learning, research, project-based learning and increased use of learning materials. In addition, the integration of ICT within classrooms is promoted. The new approach is based on the principles that each child can learn, yet with different styles and pace; knowledge, concepts, values and competencies should prioritise 'learning to learn'; students should be encouraged to think, pose questions and exchange ideas; interaction among students facilitates learning; and teachers should provide opportunities for students to benefit from their experiences and to relate to

their immediate environment (MONE, 2005a; MONE, 2007a; MONE, 2009a; MONE, 2009b; MONE, 2009c).

The new approach redefines the roles of students and teachers, and assigns new responsibilities to parents. Students are expected to assume responsibility for their own learning, and to think critically, ask questions, solve problems, benefit from learning opportunities outside of school, and to work cooperatively in group settings. Teachers' main roles include supervision of teaching and the learning process, organisation of learning environments, and planning of student evaluation. Teachers are also expected to stimulate students' motivation in learning, and to promote inquisitive and critical dispositions. The new curriculum also aims to intensify parental involvement in education through assigning parents new roles and responsibilities in home assignments and out-of-school learning activities (MONE, 2005a).

The student assessment system has also been modified by incorporating new assessment mechanisms, such as self-evaluation, peer evaluation, project and performance assignments, observation forms, and student portfolios. The new approach, which is described as 'authentic assessment', aims to take the learning processes of students into account (MONE, 2005a). Teachers are expected to make use of such alternative methods selectively in addition to the traditional assessment methods. The new curriculum was first piloted in the 2004/05 academic year in 120 public primary schools in nine provinces across Turkey, and in the following year nationwide implementation started at the first five grades simultaneously (Educational Reform Initiative, 2005).

4. The present study

The analysis presented in this chapter is based on fieldwork carried out in Turkey between February and May 2009, for which research permission was given by the Ministry in the summer of 2008. The eight schools that participated in this study were sampled from public schools that piloted the new curriculum in the province of Ankara. These schools were considered information-rich cases since they had longer experience with the new curriculum, more prolonged contact with the institutions involved in curriculum implementation, and the teachers had longer in-service training. By choosing schools where teachers had longer experience with the new curricula, and were better trained and better equipped with resources, the

research aimed at going beyond stating the obvious, and exploring teacher views and practices in the best possible circumstances.

The schools were located in different districts, in middle to low-income neighbourhoods in urban centres. These schools are viewed by educational authorities and parents as offering good quality education, particularly in comparison to other schools in their locality. Student numbers ranged widely between 662 and 3,339; however, the six of them had more than 1,000 students. Except for three, all the schools offered double-shift education, with the number of streams ranging between 44 and 108. The average number of teachers in these schools was 65. School management, teachers and some key informants working at Ministry departments, education institutions, teacher unions and academics comprised the sample of this study. Fourteen head teachers and deputy head teachers (13 male and one female) and 69 teachers (57 female and 12 male) took part in this research. Teachers' ages ranged between 30 and 64, while the average age was 40. In terms of education level, five had Master's degrees, 62 were university graduates, and only two teachers were graduates of teacher training institutes. The minimum number of years of experience was nine years and the maximum was 43 years, while the average was 16. The majority of teachers had work experience in various parts of the country, both in urban and rural settings.

Two forms of data collection were used: interviews and classroom observation. The analysis presented in this chapter is based on interviews with teachers and school management. However, interviews with a number of key informants within the field of education were also conducted in order to contextualise the cases and reflect broader discussions. For teacher interviews, those teaching at grades one, two and five were selected. Grade five was added in the case of Turkey since it was expected to offer some new perspectives and generate new insights. The particularities of grade five were related to pupils and teachers: these children were the only pupils in Turkey who had been educated according to the new pedagogical approaches since the start of their schooling. In addition, grade five classroom teachers had been teaching grade one five years earlier when they were first asked to implement the new curriculum. Therefore, they had the unique opportunity of observing the development of their students as they were educated according to the new pedagogical understandings. Due to the high number of students per school, there were several streams at any grade level, up to 12 of them. When the number of streams was more than three for a grade level, the classrooms were randomly selected.

In total, 69 interviews were conducted with teachers (26 teaching at grade one, 24 at grade two, and 19 at grade five), and 14 interviews with school management. Teacher interviews were often held in classrooms while pupils were occupied with individual tasks, such as reading, painting or writing. The interviews were semi-structured: a list of general topics was prepared to make interviewing systematic and comprehensive. Yet, multiple other subtopics were probed and explored. During interviews, teachers' views and experiences were sought on a range of issues relating to revised curriculum, including content, assessment and pedagogical approach. The questions on pedagogy focused on teacher views on the new pedagogical approach, its strengths and weaknesses, differences with the traditional approach, perceived outcomes, implementation challenges, and reactions received from students and parents.

The interview data were recorded in written notes as teachers have shown a preference for this type of data recording. In addition to teachers, 14 interviews were conducted with school management in their offices. The goal of such interviews was to understand how they viewed the new curriculum and the pedagogical approach, and what kind of responses they got from teachers in their schools. Furthermore, interviews were held with a select number of Ministry officials, teacher unions and academics. The majority of these interviews were also recorded in written notes, while some were taped. The informed consent of those who took part in the study both in school contexts and outside was sought. For this purpose, before the interviews and observations, the participants were told about the nature, scope, and purpose of the study. The participants had the right to refuse to take part in the research or to withdraw afterwards. Furthermore, to ensure confidentiality, school names were not mentioned throughout the chapter and identities of the participants were not revealed.

In addition, 76 lessons were observed in primary one (31), primary two (28) and primary five (17). At primary one and two, classroom observations were carried out in three lessons, Turkish, Life Knowledge and Mathematics, whereas at primary five, only Social Studies lessons were observed. The lessons were observed at different times of the day and on all working days, while between two to five working days were spent in each school. The duration of lesson observation was 40 minutes. During observations, I first introduced myself to the children, and answered their questions about my own background and about the research itself. Afterwards, I maintained a passive presence by sitting in the back, and not interacting with the pupils. During observations, I took descriptive notes on a

number of items, including classroom organisation, teacher and student activities, student talk, teacher feedback, classroom management, and atmosphere. The observations were aimed at documenting the presence or absence of learning activities proposed in the curriculum and at comparing teacher accounts with their actual practices.

The fieldwork data were first organised by methods and participants, and then the texts were read for a general understanding and for delineating emerging themes. A thematic analysis was conducted, and cross-sectional code and retrieve methods were used where a common system of codes was applied with a computer program (ATLAS.ti) across the whole data set and used as a means of searching for and retrieving chunks of labelled data (Spencer et al., 2003). The main codes related to pedagogical approach included: student talk, teacher feedback, performance and project assignments, research, classroom activities, use of teaching aids, examination, teacher training, and parental response. Later, by using the constant comparison method of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) data were analysed, emerging themes were highlighted, and notes were taken on patterns, connections, similarities, or contrasting points.

Having laid out some of the important discussions on constructivism and introducing the context of the study, the next part will present the analysis of the case of Turkey. It is mainly based on teachers' views and experiences; however, the accounts of other stakeholders are also used to complement or contrast teachers' views. The analysis is organized into three sections: views on SCP, classroom practices and perceived obstacles.

5. Views on SCP

From the perspective of teachers, the pedagogical approach appeared to be the most defining aspect of the new curriculum. Teachers generally associated SCP with student participation, use of learning and teaching materials, hands-on learning and research assignments. According to teachers, SCP shifted emphasis from lecturing to student activities. The role of students and teachers were redefined, as students were expected to play a more active role within classroom and in learning activities in general. On the other hand, teachers were expected to facilitate student learning and guide them in their learning process. Very often teachers remarked that they were no longer required to provide information to their pupils. Instead, their role was to teach children how to attain information from various other sources, and help them to improve their research skills. For instance, a teacher noted: 'You can find

knowledge everywhere. Knowledge is abundant in our age; we are flooded with knowledge. What is critical is to have the skills to attain knowledge that one desires to know.'

The majority of teachers argued that there were significant differences between the previous and the current approach: they were now using more learning and teaching aids, giving increased voice to students by letting them to express their opinions, and engaging students in activities that were suggested in the student workbooks and teacher guides. Some other teachers, however, believed that teaching and learning were not significantly different in the new system. These teachers already created opportunities for student participation and whenever possible experimented with learning aids. According to them, 'good' teachers, who were committed to education and to the well-being of children, were already practising elements of SCP. Indeed, among these teachers, resentment towards the choice of words in describing the old and the new pedagogical approach was evident. According to them, the term 'teacher-centred pedagogy' mistakenly suggested that the old system was centred on the teacher, that students and their learning was not the focus of educational institutions.

Teachers also discussed a number of outcomes they observed in their classrooms. They believed that children became more self-confident due to increased opportunities for self-expression. Positive remarks were also made with regard to pupils' communication skills, oral and written expression, and creative thinking. Children enjoyed learning more since they particularly liked drawing, drama, brainstorming and imitation. The new approach also enabled children to discover their artistic talents in writing, singing, drawing, or acting. In addition to these positive remarks, teachers also noted that classrooms became too noisy, and classroom management had become even more challenging especially at lower grades. Opinions differed significantly with regard to the impact of SCP on learning achievement. Around 40 percent of teachers believed that children learned better since the content load was reduced and pupils were exposed to different learning methods that required their active participation. Nevertheless, the majority of teachers (60 percent) remarked that children learned less since the content load had been reduced too much and lesson time was spent on time-consuming classroom activities. According to them, regrettably, the curriculum put more emphasis on the development of competencies at the expense of knowledge.

Teachers also discussed some unintended consequences of the new approach on education equality. They believed that the new approach was intensifying existing divisions and creating new sources of inequalities. For

instance, the new approach suggests that pupils should seek information by consulting educational resources, such as internet or encyclopaedias. But such an approach is in direct contradiction with the realities of Turkish society, since the majority of the households in the countryside or in the eastern part of the country do not have these educational resources. The following statement of a teacher is illustrative in this sense:

Students are supposed to conduct research and do some preparatory work at home. But we encounter real problems with this. Such an approach emphasizes the use of computer technologies or availability of written resources at home. However, computers or internet do not exist in every household, not even books do. Consequently, only some students can do the assignments and come to class prepared. This widens the gap between students who do the research assignments and who do not, between those who have resources at home and who have none, and again between those whose parents are educated and whose are not. The new approach indeed creates some new sources of inequalities.

When teachers were asked about the future prospects – whether the new approach will be commonly embraced by teachers or not – opinions differed once again. The majority believed that SCP signified the modern, reformist, progressive approach to pedagogy. Some even suggested that ‘no one could be against it as no one can openly oppose development and improvement.’ Student-centred pedagogy was perceived as the only alternative to the traditional approach which was attacked by almost everyone for being ineffective and boring. These statements confirm some of the earlier studies which identified overwhelmingly affirmative opinions and attitudes among teachers towards SCP (Çınar et al., 2006; Işıkoğlu & Baştürk, 2007).

Only very few teachers suggested that the pedagogical approach should not be centrally dictated, and teachers should not be forced to use one approach. These teachers argued that there were different ways of conducting teaching and learning activities in classrooms, and teachers could employ whatever approach they believed would suit to the background of their students and learning areas. Likewise, very few could suggest openly that lecturing as a teaching method also had its merits. During interviews with school management, policymakers, and some other informants, SCP emerged as the only alternative to traditional teaching. It was considered to be the most effective, scientifically proven, pedagogical approach that could improve learning and help to develop select competencies. During an interview, a policymaker even directly asked, ‘What else could we have adopted? Is there

any other alternative?’ For many, just as democracy signified the best political system, SCP signified the ‘best’ pedagogical approach.

6. Classroom practices

The interviews with teachers and classroom observations point to the following aspects as the highlights of SCP in Turkey: variety in teaching and learning methods, the use of ICT, classroom activities, student talk, group work, research assignments, and project and performance assignments.

Teachers acknowledged and welcomed increased variety in teaching and learning methods. They drew on drama, singing, brainstorming, and other activities that would entertain pupils and would make learning more enjoyable and enduring. More teachers also seemed to benefit from the use of computers and TV during lessons. They used educational programmes while teaching Turkish or Mathematics. Some teachers also played documentaries and movies relevant to the theme of the lessons and discussed them with their pupils. Some others (at higher grades) took their students to museums, factories or institutions that were relevant to the topic. Teachers believed that with the new curriculum, the school had been opened to the outside world and interaction between school and its immediate environment had improved.

In line with the recommendations of the new curriculum (MONE, 2005a), most of the lesson time was spent on activities listed in the workbooks and teacher guides. Two immediate consequences were observed as a result. First, classroom management became even more challenging as children walked around, asked questions, handled materials, and conversed with their classmates, all at the same time. This has increased coordination and management demands on teachers. Second, the image of a classroom changed radically. Previously, a quiet classroom was indicative of good quality learning since it implied that teachers were successfully managing their classes and imparting knowledge to their well-behaved pupils. However, now a noisy classroom reflected the ‘ideal’ more, since it was a sign that children were vigorously engaged in some activity.

Almost in all cases, creating room for student participation seemed to be an important concern. Teachers encouraged student talk by asking questions. They attempted to persuade free expression by refraining from judgmental comments on student responses. They tried to create a positive classroom atmosphere in which students felt free to have and express diverse opinions. During interviews, teachers particularly remarked how they tried to convince their students that there were no false or erroneous answers, and that

students could just stand up and share their opinions. At higher grades, teachers often expected students to do some preparatory work at home, such as reading the text, looking up new words or doing research on the themes to be studied. Such preparatory work was considered essential for increasing student participation in the classroom. Nevertheless, teachers often complained that few students invested time in preparatory work; hence, the lessons were less animated than expected by teachers.

Although the new curriculum encourages group work and cooperative learning, seating in groups and group work was not a common practice in the visited classrooms. Pupils were often seated in pairs in rows facing the blackboard and teacher's desk. Seating in groups was not done because of space limitations as well as due to concerns regarding the effectiveness of such seating arrangements. Some teachers suggested that when pupils were seated in groups, they conversed a lot with each other and concentrated less on the lesson. Therefore, classroom management became even more challenging for teachers. Teachers commented that they occasionally grouped pupils when they did research assignments or when they had a project assignment. Once the assignments were completed, children also presented their work as a group. However, due to the relatively large class sizes, time was an important concern. Teachers complained that due to time limitations, they could not give opportunities to each group to present their work. Furthermore, some teachers noted that group work created chaos and was not very productive (see also Altinyelken, 2010c).

There were two classes that were exceptions (both at grade five) to these general remarks. In these two classrooms, pupils were seated in groups and the teachers seemed to have strong trust in the benefits of group work. They argued that the development of the majority of the competencies and skills defined in the curriculum required interaction among pupils, cooperative learning and increased communication. Group work, therefore, was viewed as an important tool for achieving these objectives. In these classrooms, groups were assigned for each learning area; group members did joint research and presented their work in classroom by using PowerPoint presentations or posters. Both the members of the presenting group and others in the classroom could direct questions at one another. The teacher's role was to manage and guide the discussions. Group work was not only limited to classrooms, as pupils also met in homes in turn. In such cases, the parents also took up some responsibilities in organising the group work, responding to pupils' needs and managing their work. Teachers noted that parent cooperation was crucial for organising group work outside school premises.

Research assignments were a critical element of the new pedagogical approach and considered an important tool for developing self-regulated learning. Teachers acknowledged the possible benefits of increased attention on research, such as improvement of research skills and contribution to life-long learning. Some also argued that when students sought information themselves, they learned more in comparison to when they were lectured. Despite such general conviction in potential gains of research assignments, the actual practices raised various reservations among teachers. Although some could appreciate positive outcomes in terms of increased research skills, many were disillusioned and discouraged. First, it soon appeared that children delegated research assignments to their parents or some other family member. In some other cases, children consulted stationery shops, which provided a printout of Google search results. To the dismay of teachers, pupils often did not even read the printouts. Consequently, the potential benefits of research assignments were far from being materialised. Furthermore, teachers underlined that many children did not have computers, internet or encyclopaedias at home. In several cases, parents limited visits to internet cafés due to financial reasons or concerns with security. Even when internet was available, pupils were not necessarily interested in doing research so frequently. Indeed, teachers heard pupils as well as parents complaining about the number of research assignments. Consequently, several teachers reduced the number of assignments, encouraged use of school libraries (which are reported to be limited in number), and tried to give research assignments that did not require internet.

The case of performance and project assignments demonstrated a very similar and distressing practice. These assignments were often designed to be done at home, and intended to improve student capacity on a range of abilities and competencies. They were also intended as important assessment tools in the new curriculum. However, in reality, most of these assignments were completed by parents with little contribution from their children. Parents did the assignments since some believed they were above their children's ability levels, and often parents wanted their children to get higher marks. In a highly competitive education system, in which student marks also contribute to the final score which determines admission to high schools, parents are overly conscious and concerned about grades. Some shops were involved in doing performance and project assignments as well. One teacher, for instance, mentioned an advertisement in the window of an electricity shop, reading 'We prepare electrical circuits for students'. The teacher also witnessed

students collecting their assignments from such shops. The accounts of the following teachers further illustrate such concerns:

Parents are too protective. They want to do everything for their children, including their homework. They come and complain to us that we give too many performance or research assignments. Then, we have to remind the parents that the assignments are not given to them but to their kids.

We give research assignments but they are interpreted as research on the internet and often done by parents. As a result, the research skills we want to develop in students do not improve.

The new programme has good intentions but does not work in reality. We give project and research assignments but students go and look for persons who can do the assignments for them [...] Parents compete among themselves for better performance; some even do not hesitate to directly ask the teacher 'what grade did I get for this assignment?'

Parental involvement in research, project and performance assignments became such a phenomenon that many referred to the new pedagogical approach as 'parent-centred pedagogy' rather than 'student-centred pedagogy'. After increasing concerns and criticisms of teachers and parents, last year the Ministry advised schools to give performance assignments only in class, with them no longer intended to be done at home. However, although a few teachers were indeed giving simple assignments in class, the majority of teachers were still requiring their pupils to complete them at home. The main motive for this preference was the time involved. Teachers believed that conducting such assignments in class would take up considerable time, putting teachers under further stress to complete the curriculum in due time. Besides, classroom space was also viewed as inadequate. These teachers tried to convince parents by explaining that as long as parents did the assignments, their children's competencies would not develop. These statements were convincing for some parents, yet for many who were painfully aware of the competitive nature of the system they were not persuasive enough. A few teachers also candidly reported that they were heavily involved in the assignments of their own children, nieces and nephews.

In general, teachers suggested that the new pedagogical approach provided increased opportunities to get students involved in their learning process. Hence, they assumed more roles and responsibilities in their learning, through conducting research, doing project and performance assignments, sharing their opinions in the classroom, and doing a variety of

classroom activities. However, as explained above, a number of policy intentions were never materialised, or they were adopted in a formalistic manner.

7. Perceived obstacles in implementing reformed pedagogies

Despite their favourable opinions on SCP, teachers in general believed that the new approach was difficult to implement in classrooms. Some argued that it would take a minimum of ten years for schools across the country to adopt the new pedagogical approaches, and some others believed that it would never be embraced entirely. A number of issues were discussed as implementation challenges, including the inadequacy of in-service training, large class size, lack of adequate learning and teaching materials, problems with regard to student and parental responsiveness, and the examination system. These issues will be further elaborated below.

7.1. Teacher training

Teachers received a two-week in-service training prior to the piloting from academics teaching at universities in Ankara. Only in one school did teachers receive training for two months. Although some teachers acknowledged the benefits of the training programme in terms of introducing them to the main concepts, approaches and subject areas, the majority appeared bitterly critical of it. Teachers remarked that not only was the duration of the training short, but its quality was also disappointingly low. The training was considered too theoretical and abstract, lacking practical guidance. It was particularly frustrating for them to be introduced to a new pedagogical approach through dry presentations, read from PowerPoints or written notes. Furthermore, during training, a significant amount of time was spent on heated discussions between the trainers and teachers with regard to the merits of the new curriculum, and on whether it should be implemented or disregarded. Consequently, there was less time left to understand the principles, epistemological assumptions, and teaching and learning methods advocated by the new pedagogical approach.

When the implementation of the new curriculum started in pilot schools in the fall of 2004, teachers felt ill-prepared to apply the new approach. These teachers still viewed themselves in a better position compared to the teachers in non-pilot schools, because the latter received an even shorter and more formalistic training in 2005. Teachers maintained that

SCP was not easy to comprehend, that one needed to be knowledgeable about it in order to adequately practise it in classroom settings. Some teachers attempted to inform themselves by doing research on the topic, reading and conversing with their fellow teachers. The majority came to an understanding on SCP by reading the curriculum materials, experimenting with suggested strategies and activities, and by sharing their experiences with their colleagues. Nevertheless, the lack of a sound and thorough basis regarding the pedagogical approach seems to have resulted in wide variations in interpretation and practice. The inadequacy of in-service training has been highlighted in other studies as well (Gömleksiz et al., 2005; Yapıcı & Demirdelen, 2007; Yilmaz, 2009).

7.2. Class size

Large classes were discussed by many teachers as one of the biggest obstacles to the implementation of SCP. In visited classrooms, the maximum class size was 49, while the average was 36. Teachers considered classes that had more than 30 pupils to be large, so the majority complained about student numbers. They maintained that SCP could only be effectively implemented in smaller classes because student participation, activities, and hands-on learning were time consuming and increased demands on teacher attention. In order to stimulate the development of defined competencies and skills, teachers needed to encourage student talk. However, in a classroom that had more than 30 pupils, it was difficult as everyone wanted to talk and they shouted impatiently: ‘Teacher, teacher!’ Large classes also constrained classroom space, limited opportunities for sitting arrangements and made it difficult to arrange group work. They suggested that the ideal class size should be between 20 and 25. In some other studies, class size also emerged as a big challenge in implementing SCP, particularly in coordinating learning activities (Yapıcı & Demirdelen, 2007; Gelbal & Kelecioğlu, 2007; Korkmaz, 2006).

7.3. Materials

The demand for teaching and learning materials increased, as they were needed to undertake activities described in student workbooks and create more opportunities for hands-on learning. Pilot schools had been privileged since the authorities provided various materials during piloting. Indeed, teachers also considered their schools fortunate in comparison to other public

schools in the province of Ankara or in other parts of the country. Nevertheless, teachers remarked that they still needed more materials and the school budget was insufficient to finance increasing material demands. Consequently, teachers provided some of the materials themselves, and collected money from students. Studies have revealed that in other parts of the country, especially in rural areas, material scarcity was considered as one of the biggest challenges (Çınar et al., 2006; Doğanay & Sarı, 2008).

ICTs were an important part of the discussion on materials in pilot schools. Teachers appeared very enthusiastic to use computers and projectors as they were convinced that the use of ICT would improve education quality considerably. All the eight schools that took part in this study had a TV, a computer, or both, in visited classrooms. In one school, classrooms even had access to internet. Parents provided the financial means for these resources except for a few cases where computers and projectors were provided by schools or classroom teachers. Having a TV or computer in classrooms was not enough, as teachers needed adequate educational materials. They could obtain such educational programmes from sources on the internet or they were directly marketed to teachers by commercial providers. Teachers also reported that the websites that supply good quality educational materials required paid membership and that the quality of other sources was often poor. Obtaining resources to be used on TV was even more difficult, so teachers reported infrequent use of TV. Therefore, teachers suggested that they needed educational software and argued that the Ministry should also provide such materials.

Parental provision of educational materials had some serious implications. First of all, teachers often reported that parents were increasingly annoyed by such requests and were concerned with its financial implications for family budgets. Second, this trend contradicts the official policy on free public education. Indeed, despite the official policy and discourse on free primary education, parents were increasingly 'encouraged' to provide for all sorts of material needs, including desks, seats, curtains, and ICT hardware (see also Karapehlivan, 2010). This has created inequalities between schools or even between classrooms in a single school. For instance, during school visits, it was possible to see a classroom nicely decorated with colourful, good quality curtains and desk covers, a projector and a computer, and to see the next classroom without any TV or computer, or without such elegant decorations. Hence, classroom equipment and furnishing have become strong indicators of student background and parental commitment to education. This trend seems to lead to increased educational stratification and

intensification of 'hidden privatisation' (Ball & Youdell, 2008) in the public education system. As many critics pointed out, such practices appear to have produced an education system in which public schools operate like private schools.

7.4. Examination system

As explained previously, the Turkish education system is an exceedingly exam-oriented system: entrance to secondary schools and higher education institutions is governed by nationwide exams (Tansel & Bircan, 2006). These entrance exams have traditionally evaluated students on the basis of their knowledge acquisition. Hence, teachers believed that since students received less information in the new system, mainstream schools failed to prepare them adequately for entrance exams. Such concerns were also reported by head teachers with even greater emphasis. Several parents voiced similar concerns and were alarmed by what 'little knowledge' their children were attaining at school. Depending on their economic circumstances, some parents reacted by sending their children to private tutoring institutions to strengthen their chances of success in the exams. This attitude appears to have increased the demand for private tutoring, which was already a widespread phenomenon in Turkey (Tansel & Bircan, 2006). The Ministry modified the exam structure and the type of questions in 2008 by introducing the Level Determination Examination, known as SBS. Accordingly, the number of exams was increased from one to three; students were now required to take SBS at grades six, seven and eight (MONE, 2007b). According to teachers, this policy change has increased the demand for private tutoring. Indeed, all teachers and head teachers in visited schools reported increasing numbers of students at upper grades attending private tutoring institutions.

Teachers explicitly noted that they would stick to the curriculum once they were convinced that the entrance exams were no longer assessing knowledge acquisition. They acknowledged improvements in the first SBS exam in 2008, but they needed to see how the type of questions would evolve through the years. They stressed the importance of aligning the exam questions with the philosophy and objectives of the new curriculum and the pedagogical approach. The examination system is discussed as an obstacle to the implementation of SCP in some other studies as well (Yılmaz, 2009), and some argue that when policy changes in pedagogy are not supported by adequate changes in examinations, then there will be little practical impact in classrooms (Orafi & Borg, 2009).

7.5. Student responsiveness

According to teachers, the new pedagogical approach gave more responsibilities to students and expected them to be more actively involved in their learning. However, some teachers believed that students were not prepared or were not willing to take on those responsibilities. Many pupils delegated their responsibilities to parents, as in the case of project, performance and research assignments. In this context, teachers also complained about their lack of influence on students' promotion. Teachers reported that students were promoted to higher grades irrespective of their performance. According to the regulations, students could only be asked to repeat a grade if they achieved very poorly, where supplementary actions on the part of the teacher would not improve student achievement, and when students also failed their make-up exams. According to teachers, the educational policies implicitly encouraged smooth grade progression since repetition was viewed as costly for the education system. Even if all the precautionary measures failed, poorly achieving students might still be promoted to upper grades and be allowed to graduate as a way of discharging 'problem students'. Consequently, teachers remarked that they felt powerless in terms of providing external stimuli and pressure on students to achieve better and to take more initiative in their learning.

Student responsiveness is identified as one of the biggest obstacles to SCP in a study by Yılmaz (2009). The study points out that SCP necessitates a change in power relations between teachers and students. It is difficult for teachers who are used to teaching in an authoritative manner to transfer some of their authority and responsibilities to students. Likewise, it is even more difficult for students to claim and exercise such authority. Indeed, within the patriarchal Turkish society, it is not common for children to participate in discussions at home or to challenge parental decisions. Furthermore, the study suggests that students may not be ready or may not be willing to be at the centre of instruction; they may have difficulty in becoming active learners, or may prefer passive teaching methods which reduce their workload. Besides, SCP is perceived as less effective in preparation for nationwide entrance exams, therefore, students may not find such pedagogical practices meaningful or useful.

7.6. Parental attitudes towards the new pedagogy

The new curriculum highlights the importance of parental involvement in education and strives to improve their participation by assigning some key responsibilities to them, especially in out-of-school learning activities (MONE, 2009a; MONE, 2005a). Therefore, as is underscored by the Ministry as well, providing adequate information to parents has been crucial for the effective implementation of the curriculum. Nevertheless, teachers reported inadequacies in that area: although some schools arranged extensive meetings with parents at school or classroom level, in some other schools, such activities were limited. According to teachers, insufficient information generated misconceptions, confusion and even reactionary attitudes among parents. For instance, many repeatedly complained about the amount of performance and project assignments, suggesting that they were tired of 'helping out' their children.

Several parents also appeared to be concerned with the education quality: they were critical of the new curriculum for over-emphasizing competencies, and paying inadequate attention to knowledge acquisition. Parents believed that children did not learn much in the new system, especially when compared to their children who were educated in the previous system. In their opinion, too much classroom time was spent on classroom activities that were apparently enjoyable for children, yet were not so valuable in improving their knowledge. Some parents openly challenged the teachers, arguing that 'Children are empty, they do not learn', and they tried to put pressure on teachers to supplement the curriculum with additional information and to spend more time on lecturing instead of on student activities. This kind of pressure particularly came from parents who perceived education as an important social mobility mechanism, and who seemed to be concerned about the mismatches between the mainstream schooling and secondary school entrance exams.

Indeed, similar concerns motivated a parent to apply to the Danıştay (the Supreme Administrative Court in Turkey) for the abolishment of the new educational programmes in 2006. During court deliberations, she expressed her deep concerns about education quality by criticising the lack of learning and children's occupation with classroom activities (Sol, 2009). Consequently, in March 2009, Danıştay decided to abolish the education programmes for Life Knowledge (for grades one, two and three). The education programmes for Turkish at grades one and two were 'not recommended' and for grades four and five were 'recommended' on the

condition that necessary amendments were made (www.ogretmenlersitesi.com). In the history of the Republic, this was the first time that Danıştay abolished an entire educational programme. Nevertheless, the educational programmes and textbooks were instated with minor changes in the following academic year without addressing the main curricular and pedagogical concerns (see TTK, 2009a; 2009b).

It is interesting to note that the new educational programme for Life Knowledge (revised in 2009) includes a part in which the curriculum designers directly address parents. They try to convince parents that although academic success is important, their children's 'success' in 'life' is also very important. The document states that success should not be only measured by children's achievement levels in exams, and asks parents not to pressure teachers by claiming that 'We think our children are not learning much'. If parents put such pressure, the document asserts, then teachers might be inclined to focus on knowledge acquisition, and ignore the development of children's essential life skills (MONE, 2009a, p. 8). Including such a direct message to parents in the main curriculum documents implies recognition of parents as important actors to reckon with in curriculum implementation. It is of course hard to ignore them, particularly in situations where they can apply to the court and manage to abolish the educational programmes. It is remarkable that instead of carefully considering parents' concerns and revising the content and pedagogical approach in order to meet their demands, the curriculum designers chose to underline their own approach and attempt to convince parents of its merits.

7.7. Teacher resistance

Teachers also discussed 'resistance' as an important challenge in adopting the new pedagogical approach. According to them, teachers who were relatively senior in age and who had long years of experience (more than 20 years), had been resisting change by refusing to follow the textbooks or do the activities suggested in workbooks, or by continuing to lecture for the most part of the lesson time. Some schools even reported teachers retiring because of heated discussions and splits in opinions over the new curriculum, a phenomenon that was reported in some other studies as well, as a reaction to education reform (Troman, 1996). The factors underlying such resistance was often explained as perceiving change tiring and demanding, being used to old ways of doing things, and having difficulty to change old teaching styles. These teachers were also 'problematized' during interviews with policymakers,

reducing their resistance to some sort of conservative attempt to obstruct reform initiatives. The policymakers even suggested that once the more senior teachers will have left the system through retirement, the new pedagogical approach will be more widely embraced across the country.

However, the study has also revealed that resistance to certain aspects of curricular change proposals was also common among younger teachers with less than 20 years experience. For instance, they did not agree with the substantial reduction in curriculum content, as they were concerned with students' academic success, nationwide examinations, increasing demand for private tutoring and deepening educational inequalities. They expressed their resistance by supplementing the curriculum with additional resources and continuing to impart knowledge to their students at a level that they considered appropriate. Although teachers who show signs of resistance to a reform proposal are often characterised as traditional, conventional, stubborn, not having students' best interest at heart, or lacking professional knowledge (Van Veen et al., 2005), the resistance of the second group of teachers explained above illustrates the 'good sense' resistance may entail (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995), and highlights the positive rationale for it from teachers' perspectives (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). This issue will be further discussed in the next chapter.

8. Conclusion

The introduction of SCP to the official curriculum of primary schools in Turkey was accompanied by high aspirations; it was announced as a 'revolutionary move' which would transform the Turkish education system and would help to educate individuals to think creatively and solve problems, approach issues critically and challenge established authorities when needed (Güven & Iscan, 2006). Student-centred pedagogy seems to also be popular among teachers who took part in this study, as well as among other education stakeholders that were interviewed. It was perceived as the antidote to several shortcomings of the previous system, such as a high reliance on memorisation, low educational outcomes, alarmingly low student motivation, and disengagement from schooling. High hopes were raised for the potential of SCP to improve education quality and to promote intrinsic learning among students.

Nevertheless, five years into its nationwide implementation, SCP appears to be problematic in practice. Some reform-oriented practices were difficult to bring into practice (e.g. group work, discussions among students),

and some others have resulted in unintended and unforeseen practices (parental over-involvement in project, performance, and research assignments, or involvement of profit-oriented actors). Teachers discussed a wide range of issues that seemed to have interfered with their efforts to use SCP. These included poor teacher preparation, large classes, materials scarcity, the examination system, parental opposition and inadequate student responsiveness, all resonating similar challenges encountered in some other countries that have attempted to introduce SCP in primary schools (Altinyelken, 2010b; Barrett, 2007; Serbessa, 2006; Nykiel-Herbert, 2004; Yang et al., 2008). Consequently, it was possible to observe adherence as well as scepticism to SCP among teachers, selective enactment of reform oriented practices, partial resistance, and some loyalty to traditional ways.

Despite the imperfections that have arisen during implementation, teachers have reported some positive outcomes in students' affective skills, primarily in self-esteem, confidence, self-expression, and creative thinking. Some also argued that compared to previous generations, these children have become more critical, raising important questions to their teachers and parents. Nevertheless, these claims need to be substantiated in the coming years through empirical studies. Besides, it remains to be seen if teachers, headmasters, parents, governors, commanders or ministers would tolerate critical individuals. As suggested by some, for primary schools to encourage democratic values and critical thinking, one might have to start with the education of those who exert power over children (Dündar, 2004). In this respect, the Village Institutes experience also merits attention. One of the factors that contributed to their closure was the type of students that the institutes appeared to create. The graduates were increasingly viewed as too disobedient and self-confident, and too eager to object to any kind of injustice. This was perceived by the authorities as a potential threat to the traditional conservatism of the ruling elite (Karaömerlioğlu, 1998). Therefore, caution is advised if critical thinking is more than rhetoric in the revised curriculum, especially at a time when serious limitations to freedom of speech continue to persist in Turkey.

An important consequence of SCP in Turkish primary schools relates to social inequalities. The study suggests that SCP aggravates social and economic inequalities among students, schools, and regions because of unequal access to learning aids, educational resources and ICT (see also Simsek, 2006). Besides, SCP favours children whose parents are more involved and concerned with the education of their children, who are more educated, and have more cultural capital. Consequently, the reform-oriented

pedagogical practices appear to lead to the consequence of reproducing and even exacerbating the existing social and economic inequalities, rather than helping to ameliorate them. Similar implications were highlighted in other studies in different contexts (see Norquay, 1999; Kherroubi & Plaisance, 2000; Wood, 2007).

During interviews, SCP was generally viewed as a pedagogical approach on which the West uniformly agreed and which it had successfully employed. As a consequence, the informants seemed to be unaware of increasing scrutiny and critique of SCP in the West (Windschitl, 2002; Wood, 2007), and enduring debates among educationalists whether students learn better with guided forms of instruction or with minimal guidance as in the case of constructivist instructional techniques. Indeed, pedagogical approaches based on constructivism have come under increasing criticism, and several empirical studies have demonstrated that direct teaching and a guided approach to learning is more effective (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004; Kirschner et al., 2006). Mayer (2004), for instance, provides an extensive overview of such studies conducted between 1950 and the late 1980s, and suggests that in each decade, when empirical studies provided solid evidence that unguided approach did not actually work, similar approaches popped up under different names. The advocates of the new unguided approaches seemed to be unaware or uninterested in previous evidence. Consequently, this pattern has produced discovery learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and constructivist instructional techniques.

Another significant misconception about SCP was the widespread belief among informants that SCP is an established pedagogical approach and the norm in primary schools in European countries and in North America. Indeed, the rationale for the new pedagogical approach has been often explained by the officials and the teachers by referring to the need for harmonising the Turkish education system with the EU. On the contrary, SCP has been in retreat in parts of North America (Hatch & Honing, 2003; Norquay, 1999). In addition, it no longer enjoys its former high popularity and is no longer endorsed as the official pedagogic discourse in several the EU countries as it was in the 1960s and 1970s (see Alexander, 2008; Hartley, 2009). For instance, by the late 1990s, 'back to basics' and 'interactive whole class teaching' was adopted in schools across the UK as panacea for effective primary education, a highly trained workforce and competitive economy. The 'progressive pedagogy' was blamed for the UK's mixed showing in the international league tables of educational performance and the policymakers looked to some European countries as well as Pacific Rim countries (e.g.

Korea and Taiwan) which have been successful in international tests (Alexander, 2008). On the other hand, after much frustration with the poor achievement results of Turkish students in the same international tests (Gultekin, 2007), Turkey looked to the West, as it has done for the past three centuries, to modernise and improve its system.

Studies on SCP and other pedagogical approaches that fall within the category of discovery-based instruction have revealed that the effectiveness of such approaches has not been well established. Besides, attempts to institutionalise such programs have met with considerable challenges both in developing and industrialised nations, and the consequences of child-centred ‘theory’ were little realised in practice, mainly in infant schools (Hartley, 2009). The ‘progressive pedagogies’ appear to be inaccessible to ordinary teachers, lack operational clarity and are subject to a variety of interpretations (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004). Besides, the appropriateness of such approaches for teaching lower-order cognitive skills (e.g. basic literacy and numeracy) is contested (Heneveld & Craig, 1996) as well as their effectiveness with children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dembele, 2005).

Therefore, instead of focusing on the ‘problematisation’ of the implementation process and in particular on teachers, efforts should be made to develop and apply more structured alternative approaches. While considering promising pedagogical approaches elsewhere, such efforts should also draw more inspiration from Turkish educationalists and scholars in order to develop a more culturally responsive pedagogy, which better suits the social, economic and political realities of Turkish society. As Carson (2009, p. 154) suggests:

Agendas for educational improvement, which converge under the auspices of globalization, may offer seductive “solutions” in the form of student-centred instruction, cooperative learning, democratic classrooms and so forth. But sufficient attention cannot be given to the actual conditions of life in this shared world when we are too busy trying to implement reforms that are designed by others.