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## CHAPTER: 8

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### **Teachers' principled resistance to curriculum change: A compelling case from Turkey**

#### ABSTRACT<sup>6</sup>

Turkey revised its curriculum for primary schools in 2004 to overcome some of the system-wide problems and to harmonise its education system with the EU countries. In line with international trends, Turkey adopted a competency-based curriculum, student-centred pedagogy, and authentic assessment. Based on a broader study that examined recent curricular reforms in Turkey, this chapter seeks to explore teachers' views and responses to change proposals regarding curriculum content. The findings reveal that more than half of the teachers did not approve of the substantial reduction in content, as they were concerned with students' academic success, nationwide examinations, increasing demand for private tutoring, and deepening educational inequalities. The teachers argued that they supplemented the curriculum with additional resources and continued to impart knowledge to their students. The study confirms that teachers resist change proposals when they contradict with teachers' perceptions on the benefits and drawbacks of change. The chapter suggests that teacher resistance should be given due attention and the possible good sense in it should be carefully studied, instead of merely stereotyping and problematising such responses.

#### **1. Introduction**

Curriculum change is a complex process, as several factors influence how and to what extent change proposals are embraced by local actors and implemented effectively in classroom contexts (Fullan & Miles, 1992). The failure of numerous curriculum change efforts in the last four decades reminds that the teacher's role is central to the effectiveness of any attempt to reform curriculum (Kelly, 2009). Teachers do not merely assimilate the institutionalised curriculum texts, but incorporate them into their knowledge, beliefs and pre-existing teaching practices (Fullan, 2007; Lopes & DeMacedo, 2009). Based on their understanding and interpretation of imposed curriculum change, teachers respond by embracing the change,

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<sup>6</sup> The chapter is based on:

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modifying the change, ignoring, or resisting the change (Jenkins, 2000). Although several research studies have documented that teachers have rejected policy directives, and have demonstrated passive or active resistance to change proposals, teacher resistance has not gained substantial attention from researchers (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Besides, the school change researchers often view teacher resistance as a problem, and reduce it to some sort of conservative attempt to obstruct reform initiatives. In doing so, they overlook the good sense embedded in teachers' resistant actions. Such deficit conceptualisation of teacher authority discounts teachers' understanding of what is good for students (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995) and for society in general. Furthermore, some researchers suggest that: 'not only can teacher resistance to innovation make good sense, but also, under certain conditions rarely supported by standardized reform, it can evoke a resilient, even activist, self-renewing response to change otherwise perceived to be disruptive or harmful' (Giles, 2006, p. 179).

According to Achinstein and Ogawa (2006), teachers' resistance can play a crucial role in reform initiatives, although it works against the implementation of the reform in the short run. They highlight the dearth of studies that offer instances of resistance informed by professional principles and call for additional research on how, why, and which principles may inform teacher resistance to change. Drawing on a broader study that examined curriculum implementation and pedagogical reforms in Turkey, this chapter seeks to examine to what extent teachers welcome or resist changes in curriculum content load, and how they mediate the new curriculum in their classrooms. In doing so, the chapter seeks to contribute to the growing literature on teacher agency (Lopes-Cardozo, 2010) and resistance, and to respond to Steiner-Khamsi's suggestion that we 'must direct our attention to agencies resisting, inverting, or indigenizing educational imports' (2000, p. 158). The chapter highlights the positive rationale for resisting the change proposals in relation to curriculum content and discusses teachers' motivation for implementing the curriculum in different ways other than intended by policymakers. In doing so, the chapter challenges the stereotypical and unfair characterisation of teachers who resist change proposals.

## **2. Teacher resistance to curriculum change**

Within the literature, teacher resistance is typically defined as a desire and intention to maintain existing practices in the face of changes that they consider to be undesirable and threatening (Giles, 2006). Research shows that

resistance might occur when teachers do not understand and appreciate the need for change. In such cases, they will be more interested in maintaining the status quo. Habits also play a role, since it might be easier to continue teaching in the same ways rather than working to develop new skills and strategies. Besides, many people get a sense of security from doing things in familiar ways. Hence, teachers might fear the loss of what is familiar and comfortable, and might feel uneasy about the unknown when their well-established professional and instructional patterns are disrupted (Greenberg & Baron, 2000). Teacher resistance might also stem from a reduced inclination to commit to change in the later years of life and career (Huberman, 1989), and from motives to protect teacher status and self-interest when change proposals are perceived threatening (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Furthermore, teachers or other school-level staff might demonstrate obstructionism or outright resistance when they view the change proposals as being imposed by outside actors, such as international aid organisations. In such cases, teachers may believe that reform proposals are poorly relevant to the needs, priorities and concerns of the school community (Sultana, 2008), and may be even interpreted as a form of cultural imperialism. Resistance can also take the form of collective action, as in the case of organized teacher union response (Grindle, 2004). Depending on its form and intensity, teacher resistance can generate various reactions, such as vocal opposition, outright hostility, efforts to discredit the change agents (Giles, 2006) and refusal to implement reforms.

The classical literature on educational change considers teacher resistance as a significant factor in education reform failure (Zimmerman, 2006), and reduces it to a psychological deficit in the 'resistor' or to an unwillingness to change (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Teachers who show signs of resistance to a particular innovation or reform proposal are often characterised as traditional, conventional, stubborn, not having students' best interest at heart, passive or lacking professional knowledge (Van Veen et al., 2005). From these perspectives, teachers are viewed as actors who stand in the way of change. Their resistance is judged as conservative and considered a problem to be overcome (Rosenholtz, 1989) without considering the possibility that such actions might offer some insights to the reform initiatives (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). Such research studies implicitly lean towards overcoming teacher resistance with short-term solutions so that external mandates can be institutionalised more effectively in schools (Giles, 2006). Suggestions for overcoming teacher resistance include involving teachers in shared decision-making, collaboration, professional development, principles

modelling, and preparedness for limiting forces of resistance (Zimmerman, 2006).

Nevertheless, some new studies point to a different perspective, where resistance is characterised as 'good sense' (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995), and highlight the positive rationale for resistance from teachers' perspectives (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Giles, 2006; Van Veen et al., 2005). Such studies provide instances of principled resistance, which involves overt or covert acts that reject instructional policies, programmes, or other efforts that contradict teachers' professional principles. These case studies challenge the dominant portrayal of teacher resistance as a conservative act, and illustrate that resistance also arises from deep commitment to one's profession rather than from psychological deficits or a basic reluctance to change (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006). Likewise, declining enthusiasm of teachers for an innovation might also stem from their different perceptions of what constitutes good education and teaching, or might simply reflect different concerns and interests than highlighted in official change proposals (Van Veen, Slegers & Van de Ven, 2005). As McLaughlin (2006, p. 215) notes:

Implementation is not about mindless compliance to a mandate or policy directive, and that implementation pitfalls are not just cases of individual resistance, incompetence or capability. Rather, implementation involves a process of sense making that implicates an implementer's knowledge base, prior understanding, and beliefs about the best course of action.

Cuban (1992) also confirms that teachers often see their profession as a reflection of their beliefs; therefore, their beliefs directly influence how and to what extent they implement curriculum reform. Substantial research on teachers has confirmed that teachers are creative, intelligent decision-makers and have well-established beliefs about the needs of their students and their own roles in the context of education (Wildy & Wallace, 1995). Therefore, when a curriculum reform proposal contradicts teachers' beliefs on what their students need, then it is likely that the reform will be ignored or significantly modified by teachers. Studies have demonstrated that teachers chose not to implement curriculum materials that conflicted with their ideas about content and how this content should be taught (Gess-Newsome, 1999).

### **3. Contextual background**

#### *3.1. The rationale for curriculum change*

Curriculum change was perceived to be imperative in Turkey in recent years to address concerns relating to education quality and equity, and to make the education system more responsive to the social and economic needs, such as sustaining a democratic society. Moreover, there were concerns with low student motivation for going to school or for reading and learning in general (MONE, 2005a). Furthermore, the achievement level of Turkish students in various international tests (such as TIMSS, PIRLS and PISA) was found unsatisfactory, as they performed well below international averages in these tests (Aksit, 2007). According to the Ministry, a new educational approach has also become imperative due to the new trends and demands that emerged in the global environment. The most critical dimensions of change include globalisation, the evolution of the knowledge-based economy, and the information and communication revolution. Knowledge accumulation and its application have become important determinants of national economic development and competitiveness in international markets. These major changes have influenced the content and the processes of education, and have made it necessary to reform educational thinking and practices (MONE, 2005a). Consequently, curriculum reform was considered crucial, as it was regarded as a prerequisite for sustainable development and for protecting and improving the country's competitiveness in the globalizing world. The Ministry also acknowledges that educational reforms in a variety of East Asian, North American and the EU countries have been influential. Particularly the role of the EU was prominent. As a candidate for EU membership, Turkey has been adopting related legislation and undertaking reforms for harmonisation (Aksit, 2007). In this framework, adopting a competency-based curriculum and SCP was regarded as an important step in harmonising the Turkish education system with that of the EU countries.

#### *3.2. Curriculum 2004*

The new curriculum introduced changes in content load and its organisation, pedagogical approach and assessment methods. With the new curriculum, the authorities aimed to reduce the amount of content and the number of concepts taught. Furthermore, in the new programmes a thematic approach was adopted. Although in the previous curriculum terms such as 'goal',

‘objective’, and ‘targeted attitudes’ were frequently used, in the new one reference to ‘competencies’ is often made (Educational Reform Initiative, 2005). The new curriculum puts special emphasis on development and reinforcement of eight core competencies, which are further defined and operationalised in each subject. Between the first and fifth grade, the development of the following eight competencies has been prioritised: critical thinking, creativity, communication, problem solving, research, using information technologies, entrepreneurship, and language skills in Turkish (MONE, 2005a).

In terms of pedagogical approach, the new curriculum adopts SCP and suggests new ways of learning and teaching. The aim is to move away from a teacher-centred or subject-centred approach to a student-centred model. The new educational programmes recommend that the majority of the lesson time should be spent on classroom activities. The role of teachers has been modified in the sense that rather than directly providing information, they are expected to facilitate, guide and supervise students’ learning processes. Students’ roles and responsibilities are also redefined as they are expected to assume more responsibility for their own learning, and participate in learning and teaching activities by raising questions, handling materials, developing projects, doing research, and cooperating and discussing with their classmates and teachers. The new curriculum also advocates increased use of learning and teaching materials and aims to stimulate the use of ICT. Furthermore, assessment methods have been modified and a range of alternative methods has been suggested. The new approach, called ‘authentic assessment’, aims to assess the learning processes of students. In addition to traditional assessment methods such as oral and written tests and quizzes, a number of alternative methods are suggested, including self-evaluation, evaluation of classmates, project and performance assignments, observation forms and student portfolios (MONE, 2009a; MONE, 2009b; MONE, 2009c; MONE, 2009d; MONE, 2005a).

### *3.3. Turkey’s exam-oriented education system*

Understanding the implementation of a competency-based curriculum in Turkey requires a closer look at how examinations are embedded in the Turkish education system. Indeed, the Turkish education system is defined as a highly exam-oriented system (İnal, 2006). Students are assessed at primary six, seven and eight through a nationwide exam. The cumulative average of these exams determines to which type of secondary school a student can be

admitted. All students completing primary education are entitled to attend secondary schools which offer four years of education (MONE, 2005b); however, competition is intense for Anatolian high schools and Science high schools due to their reputation for offering high quality education and for providing education in foreign languages, mainly in English. Likewise, admission to higher education programmes is also governed by a highly competitive nationwide exam. For instance, in 2008, around 1.6 million students registered for the university entrance exam, and only around 265,000 of them were placed at higher education institutions that offered Bachelor's degree programmes (OSYM, 2008).

Due to its exam-oriented education system, private tutoring is a widespread phenomenon in Turkey. It takes mainly three forms: the first type is one-to-one instruction by a teacher either at the teacher's or at the student's house. The second type is provided at primary schools by teachers after standard lesson hours. The third type is undertaken by profit-oriented, school-like organisations, where teachers with professional teacher training teach students in classroom settings. This type of private tutoring is the most widespread form of private tutoring in Turkey. Students attend these centres outside formal education hours. Classes are much smaller (up to 20 students), and depending on the quality of the centres, they are often equipped with better educational materials (Tansel & Bircan, 2006). The content of learning materials in these institutions is entirely determined by the content of examinations, and teaching is geared to achieving high scores in the nationwide exams. According to the statistics of the Private Tutoring Centres Association, there were 4,222 private tutoring centres in May 2009. The number of students attending these centres was 1.2 million, and the number of teachers working in these centres was around 51,000 in the same year (OZDEBIR, 2009).

#### **4. Methods**

The chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in Turkey, between February and May 2009. Pilot schools were selected as the focus of this study since teachers in these schools received more extensive in-service training, and had more prolonged contacts with the institutions involved in curriculum implementation. Therefore, it is assumed that these teachers would be more informed about and experienced with the revised curriculum. There were 25 schools that piloted the new curriculum in the 2004/05 academic year in the province of Ankara. Eight schools were randomly selected from them, while



making sure that each school was from a different district. The pilot schools were situated in middle to low-income neighbourhoods in urban centres, yet the majority appeared to be the 'best' schools offering comparatively higher quality education in their vicinity. The number of pupils registered in these schools ranged between 662 and 3,339, and except for three, all the schools offered double-shift education.

Fourteen head teachers and deputy head teachers and 69 teachers took part in this study. Except for one, all head teachers and deputy head teachers were male, yet the majority of teachers were female (57 female and 12 male). Teachers' age ranged between 30 and 64, and the average 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 in this study: interviews and classroom observation. The analysis presented in this chapter is based on interviews with teachers and school management. In total, 69 interviews were conducted with teachers (26 at primary one, 24 at primary two, and 19 at primary five), and 14 interviews with school management. Teacher interviews were often held in classrooms after lesson observations. During a lesson hour, teachers gave individual tasks to pupils, such as reading, painting or exercises relating to the previous lesson. While they were busy, interviews were held with the teachers for the duration of the lesson, which was 40 minutes. During teacher interviews, their views and experiences were sought on a range of issues including curriculum content, pedagogical approach, textbooks, responses received from pupils and parents, and their classroom practices. Interviews were also conducted with head teachers and deputy head teachers to understand how they evaluated the new curriculum and what kind of responses they received from teachers.

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 in Social Studies. The lessons were observed at different times of the day and on all working days. In each school, between two to five working days were spent. The duration of a lesson observation was 40 minutes. Since the schools had high number of students, they had a minimum of three streams at lower grades, and in some

as many as 12 streams. In such cases, the classrooms were selected randomly. During observations, the researcher first introduced herself to the children, and answered their questions about her own background and about the research itself. Afterwards, the researcher was seated in the back and was not involved with lesson conduct. During observations, descriptive notes were taken on a number of items including classroom organisation, teacher and student activities, student participation, teacher feedback, classroom management and atmosphere.

## **5. Teacher views on changes in curriculum content load**

Teachers unanimously believed that the previous curriculum was overloaded with information, which was sometimes outdated and redundant. High content coverage requirements resulted in rote learning, stress and overloading of students. Likewise, teachers felt pressured to complete a loaded curriculum in a prescribed period. Hence, there was a general acknowledgement among teachers that change was urgently needed. Nevertheless, teachers had different views on what kind of change was needed and whether the changes introduced by the new curriculum were indeed helping to overcome previous inadequacies or were producing new ones.

Except for two, they all agreed that content load in the revised curriculum was reduced substantially. Yet, their opinions differed on the appropriateness of these reductions. The first group (around 15 percent) approved of some of the reductions and disagreed with others. For instance, they criticised omissions in the teaching of Turkish grammar or Turkish history and culture in Social Studies lessons. The second group (around 25 percent) thought that the new curriculum was adequate for this age group, while the third group (60 percent of the sample) appeared to be very critical of the new curriculum, believing that content load was reduced too much and the development of competencies was emphasized at the expense of knowledge acquisition. The opinions of the last two groups are further elaborated below.

### *5.1. Welcoming change*

The teachers who approved reductions in content load believed that children up to grade five did not need to acquire much information. They emphasized the role of education in behavioural and attitudinal development; therefore, an

increased focus on select competencies and skills, such as communication, oral and written expression, and confidence building was appropriate for this age group. Besides, they noted that content load is reduced at lower grades (up to grade five) since some subjects were moved to upper grades (between six and eight). Indeed, primary and middle schools were combined in 1997, and the compulsory education was increased from five to eight years (Eurydice, 2009). However, the curriculum was not revised accordingly. Therefore, there were a number of overlaps and discontinuities between lower and upper grades which the new curriculum attempted to eliminate.

These teachers suggested that lessons are now easier and more enjoyable. They believed that since students were required to learn less at a given grade, they learned better and they retained more of what they had learned. Besides, teachers maintained that the success rate had increased since the majority of pupils were able to accomplish competencies defined for their grade level. For instance, in the previous system, only a few pupils could master required competencies in Mathematics at grade one or two, and the rest struggled to follow the high-achieving children. Yet, in the revised curriculum, the number of those competencies was reduced, hence, an increased number of pupils were 'successful'. The teachers also highlighted the futility of drowning children with too much information: 'We used to teach them about countless wars in the Ottoman period or wars before that time; the number of dead, the number of wounded soldiers [...] Nobody remembers those, it is not even noteworthy to remember them.'

These teachers emphasized that during in-service training, they were reminded often by their trainers that the new curriculum has dramatically altered the role of the student and the role of the teacher in classroom settings. Their role as a teacher was no longer imparting knowledge, but teaching children about the ways to seek and attain knowledge. The following statements of the teachers are illustrative in this sense.

Information is not important. When children's intellectual capacities improve, they can and will learn themselves. What is important and essential is to teach them how to find information.

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 have.

If we teach students, it would result in rote learning, yet the new curriculum aims to minimise it. Instead, if we teach students how they can find information and if they do, we believe they would learn better.

The dilemma is whether teachers should give information or students themselves should seek information from other educational sources. This curriculum aims promote the latter.

## *5.2. Opposing change*

In contrast, the majority of teachers believed that with the new curriculum the amount of content load had shifted from one end of the spectrum to the other, like a pendulum swinging. Hence, they were convinced that content load had been reduced too much; it either had been moved too much to upper grades or had been dispensed with altogether. They complained that the lessons were entirely based on student activities. Indeed, the curriculum documents also clearly suggest that most of lesson time should be spent on classroom activities (MONE, 2005a). In this respect, a teacher complained:

We keep doing all sorts of activities without even knowing what the students are supposed to learn from them. Students are active for the sake of being active. They are active since activity is cool, since it is the 'trendy thing' to do.

Such teachers believed that the quality of textbooks was very low. According to them, the textbooks provided insufficient information on subject matters, the themes were listed, but there was little content on them, or they were treated superficially. Besides, teachers reported lack of cohesion and insufficient integration among themes within the textbooks as well as problems with chronological order (see also Iflazoglu & Caydas, 2005). While explaining their views on the textbooks, teachers often used statements such as 'the books are empty', 'they are not even serious' or 'the books are a joke'. Indeed, such comments were common not only among teachers who criticised reductions in content load but among others as well. Consequently, these teachers believed that the lessons were very boring and superficial. They acknowledged that students got higher grades now, and perhaps they felt more successful and happy. Yet, they asked 'Are they really more successful?' Apparently, many of these teachers did not think so, as they seemed utterly concerned with students' academic success: 'These students are not more successful. At school, they are less challenged intellectually, so their cognitive development is also slower. This is a real pity, since the new generation of children is actually more intelligent.'

The teachers were also highly concerned about what they called ‘the exam dilemma’. The nationwide entrance exams have always evaluated students on the basis of their knowledge acquisition. Therefore, teachers believed that since pupils received less information, mainstream schools fail to prepare them adequately for the exams and the demand for private tutoring increased. Such concerns were not only expressed by teachers but also even with greater concern by head teachers. One head teacher, for instance, exclaimed that:

The government is not at peace with itself. It introduces a curriculum, which emphasizes competencies and skills and yet keeps an examination system that assesses knowledge acquisition. Then how can we implement this curriculum effectively, with the full knowledge that our students want to be admitted to good quality secondary schools, while the education we offer them does not prepare them for that goal?

Indeed, teachers noted that quite a number of parents voiced similar concerns and were alarmed by what ‘little knowledge’ their children were attaining at school. Depending on their economic situation, some parents reacted by sending their children to private tutoring institutions so that their children would be better prepared for the exams, and change more successfully from primary to secondary schools, and from secondary schools to universities. All teachers and head teachers in visited schools noted that increasing numbers of students at upper grades had started to attend private tutoring institutions. According to estimates provided by the school management, in some classes up to 60 percent of students attended private tutoring centres. The participation levels were lower in schools situated in low-income neighbourhoods.

The expansion of private tutoring raised a number of apprehensions among teachers. They believed that attending both mainstream schools and private tutoring institutions consumed the majority of children’s time and left little room for play and interaction with peers. Parents even seemed reluctant to permit their children to participate in sports and cultural activities organised at school, since such activities were regarded as waste of time. Besides, attending both mainstream schools and private tutoring centres placed children under considerable pressure and stress, negatively influencing their social and psychological development. As explained by a teacher: ‘The children are studying all the time. They do not play; they keep on reading and answering multiple-choice questions. This is very unhealthy. Their mental health is compromised.’ Furthermore, private tutoring interfered with

schooling; it created disparities between children who received private tutoring and those who did not and dramatically increased the rate of absenteeism in months close to the nationwide examinations. Additionally, parents and pupils often believed that the quality of instruction was better at private tutoring centres; hence, their respect for and confidence in mainstream schools were lower.

These teachers were also concerned about the consequences of private tutoring on intensifying educational inequalities within the system. The revised curriculum seemed to aggravate existing inequalities since it increased the demand for private tutoring and reduced the chances of students succeeding in the exams without supplementary private coaching. Private tutoring institutions often charge high admission costs; hence, they are beyond the reach of households with average income. Studies have shown that households with higher incomes and higher parental educational levels invest more resources in private tutoring, and private tutoring expenditures are higher in urban areas in comparison to rural areas (Tansel & Bircan, 2006).

Teachers noted that in the previous system, there was substantial information in the books. Therefore, highly motivated, intelligent, and driven students could still succeed in the entrance exams by mastering the books, even if they did not attend any private tutoring centres. One teacher exclaimed with frustration:

Now, the books only have titles, they are full of inquisitive questions and activities which assume that students already know the content or they would gather background information from other sources. Yet, the books are the only educational material for students in poor urban neighbourhoods or for the majority of students in rural areas.

Therefore, teachers believed that in the absence of private tutoring, students from underprivileged backgrounds are destined to fail in the exams. The quality of secondary school education has a direct impact on access to universities and employment opportunities in the labour market. Therefore, there was a strong conviction among teachers that the educational gap among income groups, and between urban and rural areas would be further accentuated, leading to an increasingly stratified society.

## 6. Teaching practices

Teachers responded to the inadequacy of curriculum materials by use of supplementary resources which they gathered from bookstores or from educational websites on the internet. Some also benefited from old textbooks on various subjects. Since teachers and pupils were not permitted to use books other than the new textbooks within classrooms, teachers photocopied these materials to share with pupils or fellow teachers. Thus, some critics called the revised curriculum ‘photocopy-centred learning’, as opposed to ‘student-centred learning’, which the new curriculum claims to be. For instance, according to the majority of teachers, the textbook for Turkish dealt with grammar inadequately. They argued that the omission of grammar was a major shortcoming as children were not learning their mother tongue properly and were making numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes. Hence, the majority of teachers were required to teach grammar as well.

Another example concerns topics related to the life and contributions of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of Turkish Republic. Some teachers explicitly mentioned that the new curriculum intentionally omitted topics relating to him for ideological reasons. Therefore, they tried to add new content materials relating to Atatürk in order to counterbalance the omissions in the curriculum. Similarly, teachers were very critical of the new Social Studies textbook, as they believed that the book lacked cohesion and omitted significant information on Turkey’s geography and history. Teachers responded to these perceived inadequacies by providing direct information through short presentations and in some cases requiring students to take notes. These efforts increased teacher workload and intensified demands on lesson time.

Some teachers voiced their concerns to the inspectors visiting their classrooms. However, the inspectors advised them to stick to the curriculum and not to supplement it with additional sources so that the outcomes of the curriculum can be clearly observed. If teachers complemented the curriculum, the inspectors argued, the curriculum might then appear perfect. Yet these teachers were not convinced, in the belief that they must not lose a whole generation of students for the sake of such an experimental learning experience.

When teachers’ statements and claims were compared with their practices observed during lesson observations, a slightly different picture emerged. In the presence of a researcher, teachers seemed to be more concerned with demonstrating that they were capable of practising

recommended teaching and learning methods in the new curriculum. Therefore, more than half of the teachers emphasized student talk and activity during lesson observations. This was more discernable at grade five, during Social Studies lessons. Teachers frequently asked questions and gave opportunities to as many pupils as possible. In some other lessons, children had individual or group presentations on a topic that they had been asked to prepare earlier. Therefore, in most of the cases, teachers briefly introduced the topics and explained some of the concepts that came up during question and answer dialogues. Nevertheless, since the vast majority of teachers were observed only once, lesson observations cannot be taken as a good indicator of how and what teachers teach in an entire semester. Besides, presence of a researcher obviously altered classroom dynamics for both teachers and pupils.

Not only teachers who were critical of the changes in the curriculum content, but also teachers who had a positive view on the changes, appeared to supplement the curriculum with additional knowledge for a variety of reasons. Their main motives are outlined below.

## **7. Teacher motives for supplementing the curriculum**

### *7.1. The 'emptiness' of the books*

Several teachers noted that effective implementation of the revised curriculum made it necessary to provide additional information to pupils. For instance, the activities in the student workbook assumed that children had background knowledge on the themes studied. However, the books did not provide that kind of information; they only made reference to the themes and introduced them in a rather superficial and casual way. Hence, teachers felt the need to provide a good introduction to the topics. Otherwise pupils either were not able to carry out the activities at all or they did not learn much.

### *7.2. The myth of research assignments*

The curriculum advises exploratory work and research to be conducted by students so that they would be prepared for lessons and their research skills in general would be enhanced. However, according to many teachers, in reality this did not always work in the ways intended by the policymakers. Very often, when children were given research assignments, they delegated the assignments to their parents or to some other significant person in their life who could do the research and prepare a printout. Another common practice



was to visit stationery shops that had internet; children would shortly explain the topic to shopkeepers who would do a quick Google search and hand printouts of the search results to them. This practice became so common that stationery shops had advertisements in their windows, informing prospective clients that they did research assignments for primary school children. Parents, particularly in low-income neighbourhoods, were increasingly annoyed by the financial implications of such practices. Teachers noted with much frustration that children did not even read these printouts before coming to class. They suggested that only a few pupils did research and read the findings. Consequently, the flawed result of providing research assignments forced several teachers to provide more direct information to their pupils.

### *7.3. Preparing students for nationwide exams*

The majority of teachers were teaching children from low socio-economic backgrounds. Teachers seemed very conscious of their student's educational disadvantages, and as explained above, they believed that the revised curriculum was further exacerbating their disadvantages. Unlike children from middle to upper-income groups, their pupils had fewer opportunities to supplement their knowledge at good quality private tutoring institutions. Therefore, some of the teachers supplemented the curriculum content in order to better equip their students for the exams. They 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 throughout the years. They stressed the importance of aligning the exam questions with the philosophy and objectives of the new curriculum.

Moreover, teacher concerns about entrance exams were not only motivated by personal integrity or accountability to their pupils and parents, but were also closely related to their own performance as a teacher and success of the school. For instance, perceptions of a school's success are very much dependent on the number of its graduates who are admitted to prestigious secondary schools. Therefore, even teachers who believed that reduction in content load was appropriate tended to provide their pupils with extra-curriculum content due to pressures arising from competition among teachers and schools.

#### *7.4. Strengthening national identity*

Some believed that in the past children learned a great deal about their country, about its history, geography, and people. Yet now students hear about these topics very superficially and they do not even learn much about regions besides their own. As a result, some teachers believed that the new generation of students tended to have a more diffuse sense of national identity. Efforts to teach more history, particularly the history of the Republic and the life of Atatürk seemed to be motivated by such concerns. It was possible to find similar concerns among parents as well; indeed, one parent applied to the court for the cancellation of new education programmes on the grounds that religious influences were strong in the textbooks. In March 2009, Danistay, the supreme administrative court in Turkey, decided that the education programmes for Life Knowledge (for grades one, two and three) were poor in terms of stimulating a democratic culture and love for one's nation; therefore, the programmes were abolished. Likewise, the education programmes for Turkish at grades one and two were considered to be 'not recommended', and for grades four and five, they were 'recommended' on the condition that necessary amendments would be made ([www.ogretmenlersitesi.com](http://www.ogretmenlersitesi.com)).

#### *7.5. Old habits*

Some teachers also mentioned that teachers who were relatively senior in age and who had many years of experience (more than 20 years) continued with extensive lecturing because they perceived change as tiring and demanding, they were used to old ways of doing, and had difficulty to change their traditional teaching styles. These teachers were also 'problematized' during interviews with policymakers, suggesting that once they have left the system through retirement, the new curriculum will be more broadly embraced by teachers. Indeed, some of the more experienced teachers explicitly noted that they continued to transmit information out of old habit. That was what they had been doing for many years and they believed that was real teaching. Otherwise, they thought they were not doing their job properly, betraying their own personal principles and the standards of their profession.

## 8. Conclusion

The findings revealed that the teachers who participated in this study implemented the new curriculum for primary schools in accordance with their beliefs on the benefits and costs of change. The majority of teachers did not approve of the substantial reductions in content load due to concerns with regard to students' academic success (also identified in Korkmaz, 2008), nationwide examinations, increasing demand for private tutoring, deepening educational inequalities, and development of a diffuse sense of national identity among new generations. Therefore, these teachers tended to supplement the curriculum with additional information gathered from other educational resources and they continued to impart knowledge at a level that they believed was adequate.

Moreover, the study has shown that when teachers agreed with the reduction in content load, some of them still chose to impart more knowledge than recommended by the curriculum due to competing beliefs and pressures. In this case, concerns about achievement levels of students at nationwide exams, and success and status of teachers and schools were significant. Therefore, the study challenges the stereotypical and unfair characterisation of teachers who resist change proposals, and argues that teachers demonstrate principled resistance when they perceive curriculum change proposals as detrimental to their students and to the society in general (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). In addition, the study suggests that teacher resistance should not be viewed as a problem since it provides opportunities for policymakers to reflect on the reform proposals and to learn from teacher responses. As Fullan (2007) suggests, change is not necessarily progress; therefore, resistance to change may be the most appropriate response when there is disagreement about an innovation.

A number of other conclusions can be drawn from the study. First, the study suggests that some of the assumptions made in the revised curriculum are not in line with student background and the realities of the Turkish education system. For instance, the curriculum states that in the contemporary world, the future of individuals and societies is dependent on competencies to access, use, and produce knowledge (MONE, 2009c; MONE, 2005a). Research assignments were designed as an important tool to improve students' competencies to access and retrieve relevant information, and to encourage self-directed learning. However, in reality it did not work according to the expectations, as students delegated their responsibility to others. Besides, research assignments assume that children have access to

internet at home or in their neighbourhoods, or have access to written educational resources. These assumptions are in contradiction with the realities of many households that do not have computers, an adequate amount of reference books, or financial resources for frequent visits to internet cafés. Besides, research assignments require parental involvement, yet parents do not always have time, nor the educational background and commitment to help their children.

Second, some of the principles of the curriculum are in contradiction with the highly exam-oriented education system in Turkey. The curriculum puts emphasis on development of skills and competencies, yet the education system retains a highly competitive exam structure. Substantial reduction in textbook content seems to lessen schools' capacity to prepare their students adequately for the exams. As a result, parental confidence and respect for mainstream public schools appears to suffer. In addition, the demand for private tutoring has increased and this has led to a de facto privatisation of the education system as some critics argue. Consequently, private tutoring in Turkey maintains and exacerbates social inequalities and stratification, just as it does in several other countries where private tutoring continues to be a widespread phenomenon, such as Hong Kong, China, Japan, Singapore and Romania (Bray, 2005).

Third, the study suggests that the revised curriculum might aggravate social inequalities, since children who have better access to cultural, economic, and social resources are placed in an advantageous position. Therefore, the new curriculum appears to have the consequence of reproducing or even aggravating existing social and economic inequalities rather than helping to ameliorate them. Such concerns were also reported in other contexts. For instance, the authorities have attempted to introduce a competency-based curriculum in China. However, these reforms have raised serious equity issues there, as examination-oriented education has long been deeply embedded in Chinese culture and society (Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

Finally, the study points out a number of misconceptions regarding teaching and learning. It seems that some advocates of the new curriculum, as well as some teachers, perceive these two activities almost as dichotomies; then one might ask 'what is teaching if not bringing about learning?' (Alexander, 2008, p.73). In some of the curricular changes in the past decade, 'knowledge' is almost seen as diametrically opposed to 'skills' or 'competencies' (Alexander, 2008). Unfortunately, such a dichotomous understanding seemed to be strong among some of the Turkish teachers who participated in this study. There is no doubt that education has important roles

to play in developing select competencies and skills of students, but such a role should not be assumed to the detriment of education's other important objectives, that of improving students' understanding and knowledge base. Young (2009) also points to the dangers of 'emptying the content' which he identifies as a trend in the educational policies of many countries. He argues that:

[...] an empty and rhetorical notion of knowledge and the increasing tendency to blur distinctions between the production of knowledge and its acquisition and between knowledge and skills – the latter unlike the former being something measurable and targetable – becomes a way of denying a distinct 'voice' for knowledge in education. Furthermore, excluding such a 'voice' from educational policy most disadvantages those learners (and whole societies, in the case of developing countries), who are already disadvantaged by circumstances beyond the school (Young, 2009, p. 195).