

Accreditation Policies of Turkey in Primary and Secondary Education*

Verda Gizem Furuzan
Marmara University, Istanbul, Turkey

Turkey's quality of education is being improved in order to become a member of EU (European Union), and Turkey is following the EU's system of educational policies. In the field of education, to encourage teaching and learning, accreditation process is used. It helps programs improve and be accountable for their quality. Accreditation provides students, organizations, governments, and professionals with the security of knowing that complaints about an institution, its curriculum, policies, and staff will be reviewed, monitored, and forwarded to the proper offices for their review and necessary corrective action. The main purpose of this study is to determine how effective the accreditation policies and applications in primary and secondary schools of Turkey. For this purpose, a private elementary school was selected according to its number of students and the year of accreditation. It is one of the oldest schools that were accredited by CIS (Council of International School). To find out the teachers' feeling about accreditation process and its development, the author interviewed 24 teachers (49.7% of total teacher). The interview format was the standardized open-ended interview (scheduled standardized interview), and the same questions are used for all respondents.

Keywords: accreditation, primary education, secondary education, Turkish education system, higher education

Introduction

Nowadays, the globalization has been gaining speed among the countries. As a result of the development in the area of economy, information technology, international relationship, production, and sharing of technology, the national characteristics of some countries in their social systems have started to change and weaken in time. During the last decay, sharing the experiences about social problems of countries and their solutions about these problems has become very important. For example, the problem related to its education system is considered to be in one respect of a model for other countries (Sağlam, 1999).

Turkey has been trying to be a member of EU (European Union) and also trying to adapt to European countries, the changes emerging in the world are closely followed and taken as a model for the new regulations, improvements, and innovations, as requirements of the EU in every field. Besides, the EU encourages Turkey, as well as other member countries, to foster cooperation with the Third World countries and with the competent international organizations in the field of education (Yüksel & Adıgüzel, 2011).

Turkish primary education is compulsory for every Turkish citizen from the age of six to 14, regardless of sex, and is free of charge in state schools. Formal education includes pre-primary education, primary education,

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Verda Gizem Furuzan, Ph.D., instructor, School of Foreign Languages, Marmara University.

secondary education, and higher education institutions. In 1997, the duration of compulsory primary education was extended from five to eight years. Prior to 1997, primary education comprised five years of primary school and three years of middle school or junior high school. These two schools have been combined and replaced by a single school—"primary school". The students who successfully completed eight-year's basic education program are awarded to the primary education diploma. The secondary education system can be classified as general high schools and vocational and technical high schools. Until 2005-2006, secondary education was three years, but now the duration is four years (Retrieved from <http://www.fulbright.org.tr> and <http://www.meb.gov.tr>).

Some improvements are being made to harmonize the development of Turkish Education System with that of the EU. Turkey's quality of education which is being improved according to the EU's system of educational policies (Sağlam, Özüdoğru, & Çıray, 2011). In the field of education, to encourage teaching and learning, accreditation process is used. It helps programs improve and be accountable for their quality (Teacher Education Accreditation Council, 2010). There has been considerable interest in national quality assurance process. Accreditation is one of the ways that is used for increasing quality of the schools.

Accreditation means a process used by the public and private schools to evaluate the educational performance in accordance with the regulations. Accreditation is a declaration that a school is what it is said to be and does what it is said to do. Although accreditation serves as an indicator of quality for a school, the primary goal of the accreditation process is continuous school improvement (Basso, 2003). Accreditation is the means of self-regulation and peer review adopted by the educational community. The accreditation process is intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of education. It makes the worthy of public confidence and minimizes the scope of external control (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2006).

Educational accreditation is a type of quality assurance process under which services and operations of educational institutions or programs are evaluated by an external body to determine, if applicable standards are met. If standards are met, accredited status is granted by the agency. Accreditation has always been an essential part for helping to assure the balance between available resources and the provision of critical programs. Besides, accreditation provides students, organizations, governments, and professionals with the security of knowing that complaints about an institution, its curriculum, policies or staff will be reviewed, monitored, and forwarded to the proper offices for their review and necessary corrective action. This offers a strong sense of accountability to the international community, students, staff, and governments. The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education is provided by primary or secondary schools of education and they meet acceptable levels of quality. Accreditation of the schools could embark international level of education and learning facilities to their students (Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997).

The process of accreditation aims (Sywelem & Witte, 2009):

- (1) To assure the educational community, the general public, and other organizations and agencies that an accredited institution has demonstrated;
- (2) To promote deep institutional engagement with issues of educational effectiveness and student learning, to develop and share good practices in assessing, and to improve the teaching and learning process;
- (3) To develop and apply standards to review, and to improve educational quality and institutional performance;
- (4) To promote within institutions a culture of evidence where indicators of performance are regularly

developed, and data are collected to inform institutional decision making, planning, and improvement;

(5) To promote the active interchange of ideas among public and independent institutions that furthers the principles of improved institutional performance, educational effectiveness, and the process of peer review.

An effective school has a clearly written statement of philosophy, goals, and policies for directing its educational programs and processes, developed cooperatively by the administration, classroom teachers, departmental specialists, students, and management. This statement of philosophy and objectives must be aligned with each other and address the elements of the “thoroughness” legislation.

Accreditation provides schools to embark international level of education and learning facilities for their students. It has responsibility to provide elementary/primary and secondary level schools operating worldwide with the opportunity to receive recognition and accreditation on a global scale. Quality in European higher education is considerable. Different samples are seen at different European countries. For example, Central and Eastern European countries takes American accreditation system as a model, but accreditation process in these countries are controlled by formal agencies. There is no accreditation tradition at Western European countries. However, there are demands from higher education institutions towards accreditation (Süngü & Bayrakçı, 2010). The CIS (Council of International School) is a non-profit membership organization that provides services to elementary and secondary schools and higher education institutions around the world that have the following aspects in common (Retrieved from <http://www.cois.org>):

(1) A desire to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to pursue their lives as global citizens;

(2) A commitment to high quality education, CIS is the premier worldwide accreditation organization for international schools.

It provides full documentation and support for all stages of the accreditation process, enabling both new and established schools to make informed decisions. CIS is the only organization which is accredited by Turkish schools. In Turkey, 15 primary and secondary level private schools are accredited by CIS. Unfortunately, in terms of public school level, there is not any accreditation process application in Turkey.

The accreditation process takes place on a cycle that may range from every few years to as many as 10 years. In the USA (United State of American), for higher education institutions, the accreditation process goes through the following steps (Eaton, 2006):

(1) Self-study: Based on accrediting organizations’ standards, institutions and programs prepare a written summary of performance;

(2) Peer review: Accreditation review is conducted primarily by faculty and administrative peers in the profession. These colleagues review the self-study and serve on visiting teams that review institutions and programs after the self-study are completed;

(3) Site visit: Accrediting organizations normally send a visiting team to review an institution or program. The self-study provides the foundation for the team visit;

(4) Judgment by accrediting organization: Accrediting organizations have decision-making bodies (commissions) made up of administrators and faculty from institutions and programs as well as public members. These commissions may affirm accreditation for new institutions and programs, reaffirm accreditation for ongoing institutions and programs and deny accreditation to institutions and programs (ENQA—European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2001).

Although the criteria of accreditation differ somewhat from one country to another, they are in fact

remarkably similar in many respects. All of the accredited schools include an assessment of the mission, governance, teaching, faculty, infrastructure, student services, finances, and planning capacity of institutions in the USA and other countries (Sywelem & Witte, 2009).

The higher education institutions in the USA are accredited by MSC (Middle States Commission on Higher Education). The MSC is the unit of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools that accredits degree-granting colleges and universities in the middle states region, which includes Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, the United State Virgin Islands, and several international locations (MSC, 2002).

The accreditation is based on the evaluation team report and the team chair's confidential brief to the commission is required to affirm that, based on a review of the self-study, interviews, the certification statement that the institution has provided and/or other institutional documents, the institution meets or continues to meet the eligibility requirements. Self-study is a process that produces a written self-study report. This report and the commission's accreditation standards serve as the basis for on-site evaluation by a team of peer evaluators. During self-study, the institution carefully considers its educational programs and services, with particular attention to student learning and achievement, and it determines how well these programs and services accomplish the institution's goals, fulfill its mission, and meet the commission's standards (MSC, 2007). The 14 individual standards for the evaluation of higher education institutions in MSC's questionnaire sheet are found. For each standard, there are many questions to evaluate each of the accreditation standards for higher education institutions by answering self-study questions (see Table 1). In this research, to evaluate accreditation process in a primary school in Turkey, 15 self-study questions, which are prepared by MSC, are asked the teachers in a primary school.

Table 1

Accreditation Standards of CIS and Middle States Commission

	Accreditation standards in elementary and secondary schools (CIS, 2003)	Accreditation standards in higher education (MSC, 2007)
Standard 1	Philosophy and objectives	Mission and goals (Stand.1)
Standard 2	Curriculum	Institutional assessment (Stand.7), Educational offerings (Stand.11), Assessment of student learning (Stand. 14)
Standard 3	Governance and management	Leadership and governance (Stand.4), Administration (Stand.5), Integrity (Stand.6)
Standard 4	Staff	Faculty (Stand. 10)
Standard 5	Student support services	Student admissions and retention (Stand.8), Student support services (Stand.9)
Standard 6	Resources	Planning, resource allocation and institutional renewal (Stand.2), Institutional Resources (Stand.3)
Standard 7	Student and community life	General education (Stand.12), Related educational activities (Stand.13)

For school accreditation evaluations, there are seven standards of CIS. Eight criteria, against which CIS assesses schools, comply with 14 accreditation standards of higher education. The questions containing the 14 standards which are applied to higher education institutions are assessed by reducing down to seven CIS standards. These questions are used for the assessment of accreditation process in a primary school.

Research Method

The main purpose of this study is to determine how effective the accreditation policies and applications are

in primary and secondary schools of Turkey.

Participants

Research was conducted in a private elementary school. This school was selected based on a number of factors. As a private school, it is relatively large (900 students or more), and it is one of the oldest school that was accredited by CIS. In this way, it can evaluate the development of this elementary school after accreditation process. The participants were 24 elementary school teachers, both male and female, ranging in age from mid- 20 to 50 years. Each had a minimum of three-year teaching experience in elementary school. Teachers' average tenure in teaching is between 11-15 years.

These 24 teachers represented 49.7% of the total school faculty who are the teachers in this school more than three years. The number of purposeful sampling was used in selecting participants for the interviews. Typical case selection was used for this research. Typical case sampling is a type of purposeful sampling, in which subjects are selected for those who are likely to behave as most of their counterparts would (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2003). The main reason for the number of teachers is that all of the participant teachers agreed to be interviewed started to teach in that school after the school had been accredited.

Data Collection

This study utilized qualitative research method. Data collection in this study was the use of interviews involving 15 open-ended questions. To find out what an individual teacher is thinking about accreditation process and its development, the interview format was standardized open-ended interview. As Denzin (1978), Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, and Demirel (2008), Yıldırım and Şimşek (2003), and Patton (1990) defined, in this standardized open-ended interview (scheduled standardized interview), the same questions were used for all respondents.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analyzed against eight standards determined by the CIS by means of descriptive analysis, and were interpreted with quotations that might reflect individuals' opinions in a striking way (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2003).

Limitations

This research is limited to 24 teachers working in an institution accredited by the CIS. Because the institution has been accredited for three years, potential participants were limited with criteria of a minimum of three-year working experience in that organization. Considering those working for less than three years cannot interpret the process accurately, they were not included in the research. Interviewed teachers teach numerical and verbal subjects in the second grade of elementary school.

Results

The questions used in this study were taken from the self-study questionnaire prepared by MSC, an international organization in charge of accrediting higher education institutions and schools in various locations of USA. Eight criteria, against which CIS assesses schools, comply with 14 accreditation standards of higher education. In some cases, one standard of the CIS covers two standards of higher education. The questions containing the 14 standards which were applied to higher education institutions were assessed by reducing down to seven CIS standards.

Standard 1: Philosophy and Objectives

For elementary and secondary schools, the first CIS accreditation standard is related with philosophy and objectives. This standard is introduced to test the same subjects as philosophy and objectives standard applied in higher education institutions. Regarding this standard, the question: “Are pre-determined accreditation standards explicitly stated in the organization’s mission and applied as well?” was asked (MSC Standard 1).

During the interviews, 17 teachers responded positively, six teachers stated that philosophy and objectives are stated explicitly but are not implemented explicitly. One of them mentioned that accreditation standards are not completely implemented:

During accreditation studies, both our mission and vision were renewed in a very detailed way and shaped in a way to meet demands of both CIS and school. But there are several items that are not duly implemented, in my opinion. Some of the details remain as words only. Many implementations unfortunately do not conform to certain standards, and are not realistic enough. Everybody should make efforts for the implementation.

Standard 2: Curriculum

In relation to the accreditation standard, it is related with curriculum. Questions were asked regarding the 7th, the 11th, and the 14th standards of the MSC. The first question is asked whether or not curriculum ensure academic development and the development of student support programs. The second question concerns whether or not students could efficiently test what is learnt in the classroom, i.e., achievements. Another question is about the effective use of the student achievement assessment in education, planning, and budgeting. Participant teachers reached consensus that this standard is effectively used in their own school. In general terms, participants thought that the curriculum can effectively test student achievement.

I think that supporting the curriculum with study hours and attainment groups ensures student development.

In the light of their answers to the question that department heads and coordinators know the system used for improving the institution very well and use assessment results efficiently, the teachers expressed their content with department heads and coordinators in general.

In fact, the most important people are the heads of departments because among students, their colleagues and teachers in their department they are committed to the institution’s mission and try to implement the most. Even if the managing staffs are replaced, department heads are there to have knowledge of implementation and guide those in administration. Therefore, it takes time for a head of department who has just joined the team to own the organizational culture.

As for student achievement assessment, most of the teachers stated that their schools are good.

We have quite an effective assessment and evaluation system. Trials, performances, and classic sit-down examinations are all implemented, and analyzed in details.

Some of the participant teachers have reservation about the effective use of the student achievement assessment in education, planning, and budgeting.

Yes, student achievement, though partially, is used effectively in planning and budgeting. But it is not common to see achievements high enough to be covered in newspapers, because we do not accept our students after a test. If students are good, success level increases. In fact, we educate students as multifaceted individuals. But one cannot see the success inside as attention is placed onto the SBS (Turkish Level Determination Exam of primary schools) only. Thus, it is necessary to acknowledge what achievement is so that assessment can be made. In this regard, too, the heaviest part depends on teachers’ individual initiative.

Standard 3: Governance and Management

Three questions were asked about governance and management. Those questions cover the 4th, the 5th, and the 6th standards of the MSC. The first question is related with a satisfactory development of the school management at institutional level since starting of the accreditation process. The second question is related with school management that employs a sufficient number of people in services provided for students. The third question is about whether or not there is a good communication policy between senior management and students, teachers, employees and head departments. Overall, teachers stated that the positive opinions regarding the assessment of the senior management. Senior management performs well in accreditation studies.

Doubtlessly, the senior management team plays an important role in showing a satisfactory development at institutional level. They convene and take common decisions on the basis of schools level quite efficiently.

One of the responses for the second question is as follow:

I find teachers competent. There are even one-person classrooms for foreign language lessons. Practical courses like music and physical education are turned into branches and implemented in this way. In other courses, attainment groups are formed. In short, it is quite perfect.

As observed, teachers think that senior management is in good communication with all units:

There are positive relationships at school. Things are shared all the time. We can share our problems. But, core of the communication is established with department heads.

Standard 4: Staff

As for employees, there is also one criterion in the MSC (Standard 10). To test this criterion, the question of whether or not development opportunities were distributed equally among departments was asked. When asked about their opinions regarding opportunities provided by the institution for its employees, mostly positive opinions were expressed, though some participants disagreed.

I partially agree. In fact, it also depends on the pressure and demand by the department head and importance given to that person by managing people or given to the main course. We cannot say there is a systematic fair structure.

Standard 5: Student Support Services

The CIS criterion on services supporting students explains the 8th and 9th criteria of the MSC, for example, the school supports students that are perceived at stake in ensuring students' development in personal and social areas. Teachers in the institution all agreed that the school is quite efficient in terms of services provided for students.

Student follow-up is performed efficiently, and even excessive responsibility is undertaken related with students.

Standard 6: Resources

Two questions were asked concerning resources owned by the institution. One of them is about clear understanding of the school's strategic plan and budget development process for implementation from the perspective of resources and concepts as well as implementation of the same efficiently (MSC Standard 2). The other question is about how school's strategic planning process was developed within three years following its accreditation (MSC Standard 3). Though during the interviews, the majority of the participants expressed that the process of strategic planning and budget development is understood and used efficiently, they also thought that strategic plan is not carried out by the whole school, and budget amount is determined by school owners.

One of the participants spoke about this issue as follows:

There are some shortcomings about this issue. Teachers or principals are not authorized to make amendments on the budget. Strategic planning is also carried out by a group of teachers. It is slightly difficult to generalize it. But there is an academic board negotiating and planning all these. Decisions are taken in that board, but the process is independent on teachers, and mostly administrative.

As for development in the strategic plan across three years, one participant said:

Yes, we have been carrying out activities about this issue. Strategic planning was started last year, too, but the format could not be properly established. Now, it is broken down to titles, and specific groups were formed for those titles. In addition, the implementation is done at schools' level first (nursery school, elementary school, high school, etc.), then common decisions are taken. It is obvious that consequences are reflected onto functionality in turn.

Resources are divided into three groups: human, technological, and physical resources. Then, it was asked about what kind of a development they recorded. Almost half of the interviewed teachers stated that the school does not have an excellent development in terms of the three groups of resources. The biggest problem is experienced in connection with resources regarding physical structure.

Intern teachers are recruited for certain departments under human resources. There are some teachers teaching a small number of students in foreign language courses as well. But it does not become a standard every year. While one department is too busy, teachers in another department do not work so many hours. In addition, there is not a unit of human resources to improve those teaching. There are developments under technological resources, too, but there is not enough time to put it into practice. Sometimes there is shortage of computers and printers. In my opinion, the school does not have sufficient physical resources in this aspect. Some changes are done, but they are not systematic or consistent.

Standard 7: Student and Community Life

CIS standard on students and community life covers the 12th and the 13th standards of MSC. To assess this standard's success, one question containing both standards was asked: "The school is capable enough to ensure that the students have the required competencies they would need after graduation". On this criterion, the school also follows up an efficient process. Therefore, most of the teachers expressed positive opinions.

It educates students' competent enough from academic, linguistic development and social activities aspects after graduation. Only there is failure in all graduates' giving feedback to the school after graduation. Some students get much, but give little back.

Conclusions

In the private school, sector accreditation is optional. In Turkey, there is not any application of accreditation in public schools. However, many schools have seen the need for this status and have asked for a specialized accreditation program, it is a program geared to the private school. They see this recognition as both a necessity and an advantage to their school.

Accreditation in this examined private school is appreciated for the attainment of status and recognition. Being accredited for a school effectively motivated students and teachers, and operated a high quality educational program. The goal of accreditation in primary and secondary schools is to provide acceptable levels of quality (Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997).

Accreditation will accelerate the development of activities in Turkish national education system. It will also bring contribution to making the approach of quality widespread among schools and internalized.

It is one of the biggest steps that might be taken for Turkey to take its position in the Information

Management Era. In this way, the Ministry of National Education can ensure sustainability of activities on quality management in education and accreditation. Accreditation studies, after allocating budget for development of schools, should be implemented in Turkish public schools as well.

Interviews of the school teachers showed that the accreditation process which improved the curriculum ensured academic development and the development of student support programs. Accreditation standards of the primary school are applied well. To achieve quality in primary and secondary education, further improvements are needed in a wider context with respect to the education of teachers and pupils' life circumstances (Edinsel, 2010).

Teachers thought that school management is in good communication with all units and they also mentioned that it provides development opportunities to all teachers. As Süngü and Bayrakçı (2010) pointed out when the regulation is harmonious with the recommendations and criteria in accreditation policy, quality assurance standards and instructions have defined the principles to evaluate and improve teaching and learning activities at schools.

The results found in this study indicated that the CIS accreditation standards are mostly understood well by the teachers. And also much of the evidence or analysis of this primary school presented that it meets the accreditation standards, and it is clear and inherent within the fundamental elements themselves.

Accreditation is an affirmation that a primary or secondary school provides a quality of education that the general public has the right to expect and that the educational community recognizes (MHEC—Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2008).

Interviews showed that all the teachers agreed that accreditation has an important role for the development of curriculum, philosophy and objectives, resources, management processes, and student support services and community life. Based on the results of this study, teachers are very supportive of the application of accreditation standards. The results found in this study indicated that a continuation of the school accreditation policies of primary and secondary education would be effectible for the development of school success.

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