

An Investigation of Prospective Teachers' Attitudes toward Educational Reforms in Turkey*

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Abstract

The main purpose of the present study is twofold: (a) to investigate the awareness and attitudes of prospective teachers from different departments and class levels regarding current educational reforms in Turkey and the reasons why they do or do not adhere to these reform activities, and (b) to gain thorough knowledge about information resources that they use and the problems that they encounter while learning about and sharing current educational reforms. The study was conducted with 23 prospective teachers drawn from the Education Faculty of Akdeniz University, and it used a two-stage sampling method. A semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers was employed as the data collection instrument. The interview form included four demographic and 12 open-ended questions. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed and verbatim transcriptions were analyzed via quantitative data analysis. The results indicated that freshman and sophomore prospective teachers adhered to the education reform developments less frequently than their juniors and seniors. Most of the prospective teachers who rarely followed educational reforms indicated that they did not have enough time to do so due to their heavy schedule, but they concentrated on educational reforms in their own field of study since they had concerns for the future. Prospective teachers often had insufficient and false information about educational reforms; they indicated interest in obtaining more reliable information through conferences featuring presentations by experts. Further studies conducted with prospective teachers enrolled in additional departments or pedagogical formation courses would provide a more complete understanding of attitudes toward educational reforms.

Key Words

Educational Reforms, Prospective Teachers, Teacher Education, Turkish Education System, Information Resources

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Many societies have experienced periods of critical adaptation to new reforms (Ergün, 2003), particularly in education since this sector plays a crucial role in structuring the transfer of knowledge, social behaviors, and cultural awareness (Özden & Turan, 2011; Saylan, 2007). In Turkey, beginning in the last years of the Ottoman Empire and continuing during the history of the Turkish Republic, there have been many reforms in education. Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkish society, carried out particularly extensive reforms, emphasizing that education would be the touchstone and that teachers would be the key leaders in national reform movements (Karagözoğlu, 1991).

Educational reforms can be fundamental or *external*, affecting the whole structure of the system, or *internal*, having a less sweeping impact on the system (Ergün, 2003). These two categories of reforms can be interrelated; that is, an external school reform can also result in internal school reform (Aytaç, 1966). Turkey has seen many types of both external and internal reforms in its education system.

Educational Reforms in Turkey from Past to Present

From the historical point of view, sociopolitical changes have had significant effects on the Turkish education system (Akinoğlu, 2008). Following are some examples of reform activities during the past century.

Curriculum Development Studies: Curriculum development studies in Turkey began with the proclamation of the republic. In 1924, all educational institutions were united under the Ministry of Education and in-depth studies of school programs were conducted (Demirel, 1992). Thus the Ministry of Education became the sole authority governing educational institutions (Gözütok, 2003). In 1924, 1936, 1948, and 1962, new primary school programs were introduced as societal and individual needs changed. The program developed in 1962 was tested for five years and then, after the completion of necessary revisions, was introduced in 1968 throughout the country (Fer, 2005). In 1982, another new program, developed cooperatively with Turkish universities, was introduced (Demirel, 2008). At the beginning of the 1990s, a project supported by the World Bank was initiated, with new educational materials and course books being developed in 1993 (Koç, Işıksal, & Bulut, 2007). Through 2003, further curriculum

development studies took place in various topic areas. The most recent program, developed in 2004, incorporated three new approaches: the constructivist approach, the student-centered learning approach, and the spiral approach (Atasönmez, 2008; Erdoğan, 2007). Moreover, changes in higher education programs, parallel to those occurring in primary and secondary education programs, were necessary (Akşit, 2007).

Eight-Year Continuous Compulsory Education:

Along with these curriculum studies, broader external reforms also took place. For instance, in the first years of the republic there were two stages of primary school (lasting three and two years, respectively); later they were united into a five-year primary school education program (Tertemiz, Kalaycı, & Çelenk, 2000). In 1997, eight-year continuous compulsory education, one of the most important external structural reforms of the Turkish education system, was approved. Parallel to this reform, institutions of higher education also restructured teacher training systems (Ergün, 2003).

Pre-service Teacher Education: Türkan and Grossman (2011) stated that Turkish teachers were still widely using traditional teacher-centered methods that disregard students' individual differences. In a project supported by the World Bank, a reform-minded study on the restructuring the education faculties was conducted (Grossman & Sands, 2008). As a result of this reform movement, programs, course syllabi, departmental structures, and lesson content were changed and reorganized (Grossman, Önkol, & Sands, 2007).

Regulations Governing University Entrance: In recent years, one of the most extensive reforms in Turkey has centered on the transition to higher education. This reform aims to build a highly qualified labor force in necessary fields and to increase the number of students attending technical and vocational schools (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2002).

Regional Division of Educational

Administration: Turkey has also seen attempts at structural reform (Akşit, 2007), such as one regarding the administration of education by regional authorities. Since the beginning of the 1980s, there has been a global trend within various nations toward assigning responsibilities for educational administration to states, regions, or local authorities (Şen & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). In Turkey, studies on this topic have been continuing since 2004.

Bologna Process: Higher education programs are being restructured in response to globalization; to align with political, economic, industrial, and technological changes; and, as part of Turkey's application for European Union membership, to adjust to common standards across Europe (Süngü & Bayrakçı, 2010). In this process, student-centered education is emphasized and new regulations focus on developing students' knowledge, skills, and competence (Güneş, 2012).

Fatih Project: This project's name means "Movement for Enhancing Opportunities and Improving Technology." It aims to increase the quality of education overall, promote equal opportunities in education, and improve technology in schools through the efficient usage of such tools such as tablets and LCD interactive boards in teaching and learning processes (Akgün, Yılmaz, & Seferoğlu, 2011). Moreover, in-service training for teachers emphasizes enabling effective use of information and communication technologies in classrooms as part of teaching and learning (MEB, 2012a).

4+4+4 (Twelve-year Intermittent and Compulsory Education): In virtually all societies, the duration of compulsory education has been increasing in response to economic and scientific improvements (Güven, 2012). In Turkey, a recent reform has sought to establish three four-year periods of education, or a total of 12 years of compulsory education. Ömer Dinçer, Former Education Minister, has explained the rationale behind this reform as follows: "Eight-year continuous education disregards students' age and individual differences, and so it is not possible to equip students with necessary knowledge and skills. That's why there is a need for the new reform." (MEB, 2012b).

The Reasons for the Educational Reforms in Turkey

Becoming part of the European Union (EU) entails radical socioeconomic and political changes for some prospective members (Koç et al., 2007). The candidate countries must fulfill political, institutional, economic, social, and educational requirements. Turkey has long had the political goal of joining the EU (Koç et al., 2007), and the process of pursuing EU membership has been a strong driving force encouraging the country to make educational reforms (Cansever, 2009).

Sarıer (2010) pointed out the importance of international exams such as the PISA in evaluating and assessing the quality of education in a country.

Turkish students' low grades on international exams such as the PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS (Oral & McGivney, 2013; Yücel, Karadağ, & Turan, 2013) and their LYS (University Placement Exam) results (Akşit, 2007; Güven, 2012) have caused the Ministry of Education to carry out educational reforms.

Rationale and Purpose

These structural and curriculum-based educational reforms have affected virtually all parts of Turkish society. However, among the three central components of education -student, teacher, and curriculum (Gözütok, 2003)- teachers' adoption of and willingness to implement educational reforms can be considered the most crucial in producing actual change. Moreover, prospective teachers' awareness of educational reforms affecting their field will increase the quality of education in the future.

A literature review of educational sciences research shows that the number of studies examining the degree to which prospective teachers remain abreast of reform activities or their attitudes toward educational reforms is very low (Ekiz & Yiğit, 2007; Uluçınar-Sağır & Karamustafaoğlu, 2011). Studies in this area generally involve people who have already obtained teaching jobs in various fields and grade levels, along with academicians (Erdoğan, Kayır, Kaplan, Aşık, & Akbunar, 2011). The present study is one of the first to aim at eliciting information on prospective teachers' engagement with current educational reforms. In this respect, it is thought to contribute to research knowledge by filling a gap in the existing literature.

The main purpose of the present study is twofold: (a) to investigate the awareness and attitudes of prospective teachers from different departments and class levels regarding current educational reforms in Turkey and the reasons why they do or do not remain abreast of these reform activities, and (b) to gain in-depth knowledge about information resources that they use and the problems that they encounter while learning about and sharing current educational reforms.

Method

In the present study, the phenomenological research design, a qualitative research model, was used to obtain in-depth information of the phenomenon or experience under study and to reveal as well as interpret individual opinions and perspectives about this particular phenomenon or experience.

Study Group

The study was conducted with prospective teachers who were studying in the Faculty of Education at Akdeniz University. The study participants were identified through purposeful sampling, in two phases. In the first phase, departments with senior-level students were chosen through the criterion sampling method. In the second phase, maximum variation sampling was used in order to reflect the maximum level of diversity among the participants, and thereby represent a wide range of experience related to the phenomenon being studied. Taking into consideration class level, gender, and department, 12 female and 12 male prospective teachers studying in the Departments of Early Childhood Education, English Language Teaching, and Elementary Education were invited to participate in the study. One female student was absent at the scheduled interview time, leaving a sample of 23 students.

Data Collection Instrument

The researchers designed a semi-structured interview form consisting of 4 demographic questions and 12 open-ended questions to obtain the desired research data from the participants. The content of the interview questions was built around the research purpose, and interview questions were sequenced from general to specific (Karasar, 2011). The interview form was examined by two experts in the area of educational sciences to ensure content and face validity of the instrument. For interview form validation, a pilot study was also conducted with two students who were not members of the study group. In accordance with the experts' suggestions and feedback from the pilot study, necessary corrections were made and the interview form was finalized.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interviews were held during the fall semester of the 2011–2012 academic year. Each one was conducted individually in a private setting. All interviews were tape-recorded, with informed consent from each participant. The individual interviews were completed over a period of three weeks, and each interview lasted about 20 to 25 minutes.

Data Analysis

In the present study, a qualitative data analysis process proposed by Schloss and Smith (1999) and developed by Ok and Erdoğan (2009) was carried out in five steps. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Then, in order to ensure reliability of the data, six randomly selected transcripts were coded by four researchers independently. The reliability was calculated by using the formula of $[Reliability = Agreement / (Disagreement + Agreement)] \times 100$ (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The inter-researcher agreement rate was found to range between 81% and 96%. The themes on which there was no initial agreement were discussed further among the researchers; once they reached agreement on these issues, the remaining transcripts were analyzed. Prominent coding categories emerged and relevant, important, and inclusive quotations (Morse, Mayan, Spiers, Barrett, & Olson, 2002; Yıldırım, 2010) were organized under the identified themes. In order to ensure the confidentiality of all participants, quotations from their responses were presented by coding their class level, gender, and department.

Results

The results of the study can be arranged under eight main headings.

Prospective Teachers' Attentiveness to Educational Reforms

Data analysis regarding prospective teachers' attentiveness to educational reforms revealed that freshman and sophomore prospective teachers followed educational reforms less frequently than their junior and senior colleagues. Most of the prospective teachers who rarely stayed abreast of educational reforms indicated that they did not have enough time to do so due to their heavy schedule, but they paid more attention to educational reforms that directly affected their own field of study.

Prospective Teachers' Views on Current Educational Reforms

As illustrated by the prospective teachers' responses, the 4+4+4 education system and changes in examination systems are leading items on Turkey's educational reform agenda. Some of the prospective teachers found the 4+4+4 education system promising in certain ways. They observed that the

new education system would extend compulsory education to 12 years from the current eight years, causing the rate of school enrollment to increase. They also indicated that the new split in the schooling years would lead to the introduction of vocational classes starting at the fifth grade, giving students more chances to gain information and helping them to select their field of specialization earlier. In addition, the prospective students added that placing primary and secondary education in separate institutions would help to protect younger students from becoming victims of school bullying.

On the other hand, most of the prospective teachers voiced certain concerns about the new system. They pointed out that the new system would lower the average age of children entering kindergarten, and they said that some children starting kindergarten may not have developed the proper skills to begin school. They also criticized the new system for permitting parents to homeschool their children after grade 8, indicating that some parents will remove their children (especially daughters) so they can work at home or in the fields and that the children would not receive any further education. Moreover, some commented that fifth grade was too early for children to be steered away from a basic curriculum and be asked to make vocational choices about how to spend the rest of their lives. Finally, they expressed feelings that the new system had been rushed through and that the infrastructure to carry out the new system was not in place.

With regard to changes in examination systems, teachers stated that changes in central examination testing for high schools, university admissions, and teacher designation represented positive attempts to improve these systems in Turkey.

Prospective Teachers' Views on Current Educational Reforms in Their Specialties

Responses of prospective teachers in relation to current educational reforms in their specialties differed. Prospective teachers from the Departments of Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education specified the 4+4+4 education system as the most important reform, whereas prospective teachers from the Department of English Language Teaching perceived constructivist curriculum, recruiting native English teachers, and changes in the public personnel selection examination as the most significant educational reforms.

Problems in Turkey's Education System

Many of the prospective teachers mentioned problems related to their own specialties. Participants from the Department of Elementary Education identified unstable examination systems, teacher redundancies, and in-service education needs of teachers as problematic areas. According to participants from the Department of English Language Teaching, the public personnel selection examination, unstable education policies, the poor quality of teacher education, and the age at which students begin to learn foreign languages were important education problems. Participants from the Department of Early Childhood Education criticized the lack of compulsory early childhood education and the currently existing theory-based education in the Turkish education system. Almost all the participants agreed that the current educational reforms would not resolve the problems in Turkey's education system.

Information Resources

Prospective teachers reported that they use the Internet -especially social networking services, news websites, and websites of the Student Selection and Placement Center and the Ministry of National Education- to gather information about educational reforms in Turkey. They also indicated that they learned about educational reforms via television, newspapers, social surroundings, faculty members, education magazines, journals, and books.

Problems with Obtaining Reliable Information about Educational Reforms

Prospective teachers indicated that they had problems in obtaining reliable information about educational reforms. They complained about media bias and information pollution. In response to these problems, they called for unbiased media reporting and said that official authorities should publicize educational reforms more openly and extensively.

Information Sharing

Prospective teachers differed in their attitudes toward sharing information about educational reforms. They stated that they exchanged information with friends, classmates, and instructors through face-to-face chatting, in-class discussions, and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and Twitter).

Prospective Teachers' Suggestions Regarding Educational Reforms

Within the scope of the study, prospective teachers were asked if they had any suggestions regarding educational reforms. Some of the prospective teachers stressed that, before making educational reforms, relevant authorities should consult experts and provide the necessary infrastructure. They also voiced the opinion that prospective and current teachers should be kept informed and should be required to complete pre- and in-service training about educational reforms. Furthermore, they emphasized that policies promoting educational stability and continuity should be adopted and that changes should be firmly based on a long-term vision of improvement and quality enhancement.

Discussion and Recommendations

In the present study, the qualitative analysis of the data obtained through interviews indicated that most of the prospective teachers did not follow (or want to follow) educational reforms very closely. This result may be attributed to their distrust of ever-changing education systems and curricula, a kind of attitudinal fatigue caused by these constant and rapid changes, and unreliable information resources. In addition, the results showed that freshman and sophomore prospective teachers followed educational reforms less frequently than juniors and seniors, due to their academic and social engagements and because the juniors and seniors had more active concerns for their professional future.

The results also showed that almost all prospective teachers named the 4+4+4 education system first among educational reforms. This emphasis may result from the issue's frequent and long appearance in the media, its potential to turn the education system upside down throughout the country, and its radical effects on prospective teachers' future professional opportunities and teaching practices. Some of them found it promising since they thought that the new education system would implement 12-year compulsory education, increase the school enrollment rate, and decrease inequalities in students' transition to higher education. However, most of the prospective teachers criticized the new system. This criticism may be associated with their political views, educational philosophies, or general attitudes toward change. Prospective teachers' concerns about the politically motivated nature of reforms parallel the results of other studies conducted with teacher educators and educational leaders (Grossman et al.,

2007; Türkan & Grossman, 2011). There are several prevalent criticisms of the 4+4+4 education system, one of which is that the new system could hurt the less privileged and deepen social inequalities (Sökmen, 2012). Other concerns are related to the starting age for children entering kindergarten, the option to homeschool children, the potential increase in the number of child brides and teenage mothers, and the inability to guarantee an environment free of discrimination caused by a prescribed list of religious classes (Güven, 2012).

Another issue that emerged from the data was that prospective teachers emphasized the top-down nature of the reform movements and lack of consultation of stakeholders as a reason for their limited acceptance. Similar results can be found in other studies on curriculum reforms in Turkish education (Grossman et al., 2007; Türkan & Grossman, 2011).

Most of the prospective teachers referred to the radical and rapid changes in teacher education and educational policies in general as chronic problems of Turkey's education system, and they believed that the current round of educational reforms would not resolve these problems. The rationale behind their disbelief in reform movements was educational uncertainty and instability, along with the lack of necessary infrastructure. This result can be found in other studies on educational reforms as well (Akşit, 2007; Şen & Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Türkan & Grossman, 2011).

Finally, the study found that prospective teachers were receiving insufficient and false information about educational reforms, which may be linked in part to their heavy dependence on information provided by social media and in part to authorities' failure to openly and objectively share sufficient information about the reform movements.

Based on the discussion presented above, several recommendations are suggested. In order for prospective teachers to be more informed about educational reforms, conferences and seminars featuring expert perspectives on changes in the Turkish education system and curricula could be helpful. The Ministry of National Education and the Council of Education and Morality could share educational reforms via the media, and prospective teachers could be encouraged to follow their web pages on a regular basis. As the present study examined the views of prospective teachers from several particular departments, further studies should be conducted with prospective teachers enrolled in different departments or pedagogical formation courses to provide a more complete understanding of future teachers' attitudes toward educational reforms.

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