

Rebuilding the Past Through Dusty Stuff: How Turkish Students Respond to Primary Source-based Social Studies Education¹

Melisa Akbulut

İstanbul University-Cerrahpaşa, Turkey

Mehmet Açıkalın

İstanbul University-Cerrahpaşa, Turkey

Abstract:

While the use of primary sources in education has long been an object of interest, their adoption is still lacking in social studies courses in Turkey. This work presents the results of a qualitative study conducted with the participation of 37 students and a social studies teacher with the aim to reveal seventh-grade students' and teachers' opinions on primary source-based activities used to teach a social studies unit. Semi-structured interviews, field observation notes, and primary source analysis handouts were used. We find that primary source-based activities helped participants to better understand the lessons, increased interest, motivation, and participation in the course, supported empathy development, and gave students the opportunity to express themselves. Some of the issues that emerged in the use of primary sources were the difficult readability of some of the sources, challenges in managing time effectively, and difficulties experienced by some of the students working in groups.

Key words: primary source, social studies, social studies education in Turkey

Introduction

The use of primary source-based teaching in social studies and history education has been advocated by many educators (Ata, 2011; Eamon, 2006; Ensminger & Fry, 2012; Mason Bolick,

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Corresponding author: melisa.akbulut@ogr.iu.edu.tr

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2006). The main underlying reason for this strong support is that it has potentially far-reaching benefits in terms of the learning development of students when applied effectively (Ata, 2002; Stanton, 2012; Torres, 2016). Many studies have indicated that primary source-based teaching enhances the development of students' critical and analytical thinking skills (Akbaba, 2005; Ata, 2002; Barton & Levstik, 2011; Çencen, 2017; Doğan & Dinç, 2007; Eamon, 2006; Morgan & Rasinski, 2012; Seyhan, 2018; Stanton, 2012; Van Fossen & Shiveley, 2000; Yılmaz, 2008) and enables them to visualize historical events from various angles (Yılmaz, 2008), which provides insight into the perspectives of people who lived in the past (Ata, 2002; Barton & Levstik, 2011; Çencen, 2017; Van Sledright, 2004). In addition, primary source-based teaching may help to implement an interdisciplinary teaching approach (Patterson, Weaver, Fletcher, Connor, Thomas, & Ross, 2017) in which students' various skills and abilities, gained from other courses, can also be activated (Rulli, 2003). Not surprisingly, educators have pointed out that this integrative approach may make social studies and history courses more engaging (Açıklan, 2018; Cooper & Dilek, 2004; Çencen, 2017; Kızıl, 2018; Lawlor, 2003; Sandwell, 2008; Ünlüer & Yaşar, 2012; Yılmaz, 2008) and motivate the learners to do further research about the studied topics (Kızıl, 2018; Morris, 2002).

Primary sources reflect the everyday lives of ordinary people via personal accounts such as letters, diaries, and photographs and help students to view history with a more holistic and comprehensive understanding rather than as the chronicling of the lives of great men. As Barton (2018) notes, if educators want pupils to understand a period, it is essential to show them what that period looked like. Original historical sources, particularly personal accounts, have the potential to enable students to have at least a general impression of the period under investigation. Such sources can help captivate the interests of the students and enhance their understanding of the relevance of historical events for everyone. Moreover, primary source-based teaching may help to overcome the issues caused by traditional history teaching (Osborne, 1986), including low levels of classroom participation and engagement. According to Foster and Padgett (1999), due to the dominance of teacher-centered lectures, recitation, memorization of facts and dates, and the general reliance on a single textual source (mostly textbooks) in social studies and history courses, students on the whole find such courses irrelevant, tedious, and boring. On the other hand, primary source-based activities can encourage students to actively participate in class (Kızıl, 2018) and assist them in developing their thoughts by discovering different perspectives, observing, and comparing evidence (Doğan & Dinç, 2007). This also helps students to grasp how social scientists work with a variety of primary materials (Barton, 2018; Coppersmith & Song, 2017; Wineburg, 2010); this consequently allows learners to comprehend

Corresponding author: melisa.akbulut@ogr.iu.edu.tr

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the importance of data analysis and to base their ideas on evidence (Safran & Köksal, 1998; Van Fossen & Shiveley, 2000).

The advantages of the integration of primary sources into social studies education are also in compliance with the principles of constructivist pedagogy. Constructivism promotes the active participation of learners during the process of knowledge acquisition, as advocates of this approach claim that knowledge building generally occurs as a result of socially and/or individually active processes (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003; Hendry, 1996; Prawat & Floden, 1994; Scheurman, 1998). Likewise, primary source-based instruction provides various opportunities for students to work on a diverse array of sources either individually or with their peers. Primary sources such as letters, diaries, pictures, and even official documents can play an integral role in offering different perspectives, beliefs, ideas, and experiences for those studying history, humanities, and the social sciences. Therefore, primary sources are essential materials that include multiple perspectives, which also is one of the main principals of constructivist pedagogy (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003; Jonassen, 1992). Engaging with multiple viewpoints provides opportunities for the individual to investigate various beliefs, ideas, and perspectives that may help them to construct their own knowledge. Consistent with Doolittle and Hicks (2003), teachers should create learning tasks to engage students with different perspectives; the following study maintains that primary source-based instruction is among the best ways to accomplish this.

Due to these benefits, many educational organizations support the use of primary sources for educational purposes: The American Historical Association (AHA), the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS), the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), and the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority are educational organizations that encourage the use of primary sources in their criteria and standards (Açıklalın, 2018; Ata, 2002; Hicks, Lee, Berson, Bolick, & Diem, 2014). Most states in the U.S. support the use of primary sources in social studies, English language and literature, arts, and science lessons (Cairn, 2012; Ensminger & Fry, 2012). To encourage the use of primary sources in the United States, state libraries have designed educational programs through the use of archival materials (Ata, 2011; Coppersmith & Song, 2017), provide scholarships, organize summer schools, and support the development of primary source activities in line with state curricula by bringing together archivists and educators. In addition, the development of computer and internet technology has made it easier than ever to access primary sources (Coppersmith & Song, 2017; Mason Bolick, 2006). For instance, the Library of Congress added 1.3 million pieces of work to its collection in 2018 alone and has transferred 30 new collections to its website (LOC, 2019), while the National Archives and

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Records Administration provided public access to 92.6 million pages of digitized records in 2019 (NARA, n.d.).

On the other hand, despite the increasing availability of sources, research shows that the integration of primary sources into social studies and history education courses is not at the expected level in terms of frequency of use and effectiveness (Açıklın, 2018; Ensminger & Fry, 2012; Hicks, Doolittle, & Lee, 2004; Patterson, Lucas, & Kithinji, 2012). Many educators still use textbooks as the main (or only) teaching material and tend to disregard other teaching materials (Tangülü, Tosun, & Kocabıyık, 2014). Textbooks are often inadequate in terms of providing primary sources in different formats, giving place to activities that enable the pupils to use their high level of thinking skills, capturing the imagination of students (Barton, 2018; Doğan & Torun, 2018), and encouraging them to participate in classroom activities (Tangülü et al., 2014). Moreover, teachers who help their students gain critical thinking skills while working on evidence are still in the minority (Hicks et al., 2004). Research shows that even those who integrate these sources into the curriculum tend to employ them at low levels. Patterson et al. (2012), who evaluated teachers' lesson plans according to Bloom's taxonomy, found that when teachers use primary source documents in their lesson planning, they usually do not go beyond recalling and understanding phases. In their research on 21 social studies teachers whose lesson plans included primary source documents, they defined 52 percent of the lesson activities as low order, and among high order activities only two reached the creation phase. The underlying reasons for the limited integration of primary sources into social studies instruction can be summarized as follows: (a) teachers' lack of familiarity with historical interpretation and questioning (Dilek & Yapıcı, 2008; Dönmez & Altıkulaç, 2014; Gilliland- Swetland, Kafai, & Landis, 1999; Kızıl, 2018); (b) national social studies and history textbooks not placing enough importance on thinking skills (Doğan & Torun, 2018; Şahin, 2012); (c) the mainstream belief that most students are reluctant or not capable of analyzing historical primary sources (Ensminger & Fry, 2012; Hicks et al., 2004; Van Sledright, 2004); d) educators' preconceptions that studying primary sources would fail to capture the imagination of learners (Eamon, 2006; Hutchinson, 2005); and (e) teachers' concerns about time constraints and covering all objectives in social studies curricula (Çelikkaya & Kuş, 2009; Kuş & Çelikkaya, 2010; Ulusoy & Gülüm, 2009). These biased perspectives and aforementioned factors may prevent a high level of adoption of primary resources in education and lead to a general lack of engagement among pupils.

Despite this, we believe that it is possible to apply primary source-based teaching successfully in various school settings and overcome all barriers and issues reported. Thus, the main purpose of

Corresponding author: melisa.akbulut@ogr.iu.edu.tr

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this study is the application of primary source-based teaching in one middle school in a metropolitan city in Turkey and sharing the experiences and evaluations of the students and their teacher. First, we will acknowledge the present literature explaining the current situation for social studies and primary source-based teaching in Turkey.

Social Studies and Primary Source-based Education in Turkey

The content and the names of social studies courses have changed many times throughout the history of modern Turkey. Initially, these courses were taught as discipline-based courses under the name of history, geography, and civics (Safran & Ata, 2003). In 1968, these discipline-based courses were unified under the name of *Social Studies* in primary school curricula, and a few years later it was also included in the middle school curricula as the integrative approach became more prevalent. Currently, the content and name of social studies lessons change from grade to grade. In elementary school, from first through fourth grade, it is named *Life Studies*, while in middle school, from fourth to seventh grade, it is named *Social Studies*. In the senior year of middle school and during high school, social studies courses are separately taught as discipline-based courses such as history, geography, sociology, and psychology.

Since the curriculum reform movement in 2005, the Ministry of National Education has been trying to transform the social studies curriculum into one based on an approach to constructivist education that encourages the use of teaching activities that engage students in critical thinking and analysis and which nourishes their conceptions of time, change, and continuity (Açıklan, 2018; Tangülü & Çıtacı, 2016). Primary source-based instruction can be considered to support the aforementioned skills and conceptions that are components of constructivist pedagogy.

Accordingly, the recent national social studies education curricula in Turkey promotes the use of historical evidence of different periods and places. It suggests that the connection between the past, present, and the future should be established both in the curricula and textbooks, and students should be familiarized with the research methods used by social scientists as they explore primary sources (Ministry of National Education [MNE], 2018). Despite the strong support of primary source-based teaching provided by the Ministry of National Education, applications of primary source-based teaching activities in social studies and history classrooms have not met expected levels (Yılmaz, 2008). While there could be several reasons for that, three main reasons have emerged from the literature: (a) issues related to teacher training, (b) issues that in-service teachers encounter, and (c) textbook-related issues.

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Practice-based education requires the use of different evidence and materials complimented by active student participation. This in turn has the potential to bolster skill development among students. Unfortunately, despite being expected to conduct a practical lesson, social studies teachers are still struggling to apply student-centered teaching activities (Altınyelken, 2011; Yılmaz, 2008). This could be explained by the dominance of theoretical courses within the social studies teacher education program in Turkey. Although the social studies teacher education program has been revised several times in the last two decades, practice-based courses are extremely limited in the program. In the current social studies teacher education program, which was modified again in 2018, theory-based teaching comprises 90.9 percent of courses, while only 9.1 percent is devoted to practice-based teaching (Tokcan & Tangülü, 2019). The new teacher education program offers practice-based courses in only three out of a total of eight semesters. This shows that the teacher education program in Turkey is mostly focused on theory-based knowledge rather than teaching practice. Moreover, the courses titled *Historical Evidence in Social Studies Teaching*, *Local and Oral History*, and *Material Design in Social Studies Teaching* are offered as elective courses rather than as core courses (Council of Higher Education in Turkey [CoHE], 2018). Although it is an optimistic development for nourishing primary source-based teaching in the social studies teacher education program, these courses were added to the program a year prior to the publishing of this article; therefore, any tangible influences of this implementation, if any, may take some time. Accordingly, it can be concluded that social studies teachers are not familiar enough or have insufficient experience using primary sources in their classrooms (Dönmez & Altıkulaç, 2014; Kızıl, 2018), even though the use of these sources is promoted in the Turkish social studies curricula.

According to research conducted by Dönmez and Altıkulaç (2014), preservice social studies teachers do not consider themselves adequate in terms of using primary sources. Similarly, Turan and Aslan (2015) state that preservice social studies and history teachers are not able to analyze visual historical evidence. In their research with 48 preservice teachers, they pointed out that even the definition of historical visuals is challenging for teacher candidates, and they tend to misevaluate the evidence/primary sources provided to them. Likewise, Dilek and Yapıcı (2008) in their research with preservice history teachers found that the teacher candidates do not understand the historical texts they read adequately, and hence cannot use their previous knowledge and historical inquiry skills. This research shows that both social studies and history preservice teachers are not very familiar with primary sources and have a lack of expertise in terms of employing them pedagogically. As a natural consequence, teachers have been unable to go beyond applying traditional teaching methods and materials (Çelikkaya & Kuş, 2009; Kızıl,

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2018; Safran & Ata, 2003; Ulusoy, 2009) and do not even consider integrating primary sources when they start to teach (Yılmaz, 2008).

Therefore, as expected, research studies focusing on teaching and instruction in social studies education in Turkey generally reveal an immense predominance of lecture-based traditional teaching methods over other student-centered teaching methods, such as primary source-based teaching, which are largely marginal in the classroom. The study of Tangülü et al. (2014) indicated that in-service social studies teachers do not use different course sources and materials other than textbooks, whereby their teaching is mostly based on direct instruction and question-answer methods. Other studies show that in-service social studies teachers mostly exhibit repeated reliance on traditional classroom aids such as blackboards, maps, and/or globe models of the earth as instructional materials to supplement textbooks (Çelikkaya, 2013; Çoban & İleri, 2013; Güven & Taşyürek, 2013). It seems that social studies teachers in Turkey do not go beyond using traditional teaching materials, and integrating primary sources as teaching material is almost unknown to them. Considering the reasons that prevent teachers from using different materials like primary sources in their classrooms, it is seen that in addition to teachers' lack of knowledge and experience, deficiencies with in-service training (Çoban & İleri, 2013), overcrowded classrooms, and worries about not being able to cover all topics required by the curriculum are also among the issues that in-service teachers face (Çelikkaya & Kuş, 2009; Kuş & Çelikkaya, 2010; Ulusoy & Gülüm, 2009). These problems often lead teachers to use textbooks instead of integrating primary sources into the lesson. Furthermore, research has identified how tedious and inefficient social studies and history textbooks are in regard to spurring students to think independently and carry out their own research (Doğan & Torun, 2018; Safran & Ata, 2003). Social studies textbooks are mostly focused on visual primary sources and are inadequate in the sense of providing alternative forms of evidence such as oral, audio, and community primary sources (Çakır, 2016; Yılmaz, 2008); however, the textbook visuals have been criticized. In a recent study, Polat and Özkaral (2020) indicated that some visual sources do not go beyond being ornamental elements, while the number of primary sources such as letters and posters have decreased even in the most recent editions of social studies textbooks. The same problems exist in digital textbooks in Turkey, presented online at the Ministry of National Education website: The digital textbooks are pdf copies of printed textbooks and have no interactive features.

The multiple difficulties and issues prevalent within the social studies teaching program, such as the over-reliance on textbooks, can contribute significantly to a general lack of motivation in

Corresponding author: melisa.akbulut@ogr.iu.edu.tr

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class, whereby teachers negate the benefits of utilizing primary sources and thus eventually revert back to and reinforce rote learning during lessons (Akbaba, 2005).

More work should be done in social studies and history education courses to encourage the use of primary sources and demonstrate how they can be included in the course to achieve the benefits that can be gained from their use. In this light, the purpose of this study is to reveal students' and teachers' opinions on primary source-based activities used to teach a seventh-grade social studies unit called People, Places, and Environments. The research questions for this study are:

- (1) How do students interpret their experiences about the activities they have done with primary sources in the course (in terms of positive and negative opinions and recommendations to prevent negative situations encountered during the activities)?
- (2) How does the teacher interpret her experiences about the activities she has done with primary sources in the course (in terms of positive and negative opinions and recommendations to prevent negative situations encountered during the activities)?

Method

Research Model

This study is based on qualitative research with the aim of revealing participants' views and experiences of working with primary source material. The goal of qualitative research is to reveal how people interpret and ascribe meaning to their experiences, and researchers try to understand what the participants experience during a study and provide a more comprehensive evaluation instead of generating numeric data (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research has many different forms that can be employed to investigate various research questions. According to Patton (2015), qualitative research could also be used to evaluate the implementation of a program so that a researcher can evaluate how his/her planned application may or may not work in practice; thus, we have adopted "implementation evaluation" (Patton, 2015) as the research design in this study in order to reveal how the practices were organized, what the participants experienced, how they interpreted their experiences, the role of the practitioner, and how our planned instructional design worked in practice.

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Settings and Study Group

The study was conducted in a low- and middle-income neighborhood school in Istanbul, Turkey, with a class of 37 seventh-grade students and their social studies teacher. This school and class were purposefully selected because they reflected the general school and classroom standards in Istanbul. We preferred to observe the implementation of primary source-based activities in a crowded public middle school because we wanted to challenge the mainstream belief that it is not possible to successfully apply these types of activities in public schools in Turkey. Our main reason for selecting the middle school level was the middle school social studies curriculum's greater variety of topic selections and flexibility to apply such types of interactive instruction, compared to high school discipline-based courses. This selection also gave us the chance to prove the possibility of the implementation of primary source-based teaching with relatively younger students, who in this case are 12-13 years old.

Twenty-one of the 37 students were female and 16 were male. Most of the students came from families who migrated to Istanbul from different regions in Turkey. Three of the participants were inclusive students, children who are physically healthy but have learning difficulties; the diagnosis of inclusive students in Turkey is approved by counseling and research centers. Apart from Turkish students, there were also five Syrian students in the classroom, and two of them did not speak Turkish very well. Therefore, it is clear that while the study group is diverse, a majority of the students have migrant experiences. The social studies teacher was a 26-year-old female with four years of teaching experience. She reported that she was not familiar with primary source-based teaching and that this study is her first real experience of applying primary sources in her teaching.

Primary source-based activities were applied to all 37 students in the classroom; however, we only interviewed 18 selected students due to time constraints. The students who were interviewed were selected to be heterogeneous in terms of academic success level, to represent different genders and cultural diversity, and were volunteers. The participant teacher helped the researcher with the selection process of the students for the interview; she recommended them as she is more knowledgeable about their background. Although the male to female ratio was also considered during the selection process, eventually 12 female and 6 male students were interviewed due to the class having a female majority. To increase the heterogeneity of the group, one of the inclusive students also was included in the interviews. Therefore, almost half of the class population were interviewed for this study.

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Access to Primary Sources and Creation of Activities

The study was applied in the 2018-2019 academic year; the activities were created in 2017-2018. We began by finding suitable primary sources that could be integrated into social studies instruction. However, this process proved to be difficult and very time-consuming as there are no organizations in Turkey that archive primary sources related to curricula. Primary sources were gathered over a number of months by exploring various collections in libraries, personal archives, public institutions, and the internet.

An instructional unit related to emigrant issues was selected for this study, as it is a suitable unit for primary source inclusion. Thus, based on the collected primary sources, a number of teaching activities were developed and applied to the teaching unit *Population in Our Country*, which included migration as one of the main topics. A total of 10 activities were planned and implemented throughout the study. We focused on a series of primary sources that reflect the characteristics of the migration period from different angles. The various formats of primary sources included maps, official statistics data, photos, newspapers, letters, postcards, and videos. To analyze the primary sources, students were randomly assigned to one of six groups, which remained the same until the end of the study. These students were unfamiliar with studying primary sources and, in general, did not have any experiences working on such activities that require more focus, skill, and engagement. Rather, they were only used to lecture and Q&A based instruction. Another reason for the creation of these study groups is that the class was too crowded for such types of activities, and we thought this strategy would mitigate the workload of the teacher, as it would have been difficult for her to pay attention to all the students individually. We also thought that the study groups would enable students to help and interact with each other and that this might help them overcome the possible intensity that they might have felt during the activities. To mirror how the implementation phase was conducted, two activities that most captured the students' attention (postcards and letters) will be touched upon.

Implementation Phase of Postcards and Letter Activities

Postcards (See Figures 1-2) sent by Turkish people—who migrated abroad for various reasons—to their families received great attention from the pupils. For this activity, six original postcards, which we found in a flea market, were distributed to the students. To avoid problems that might occur due to handwriting, printed copies of texts were also given to students. First, we wanted them to look at the postcard as a whole.

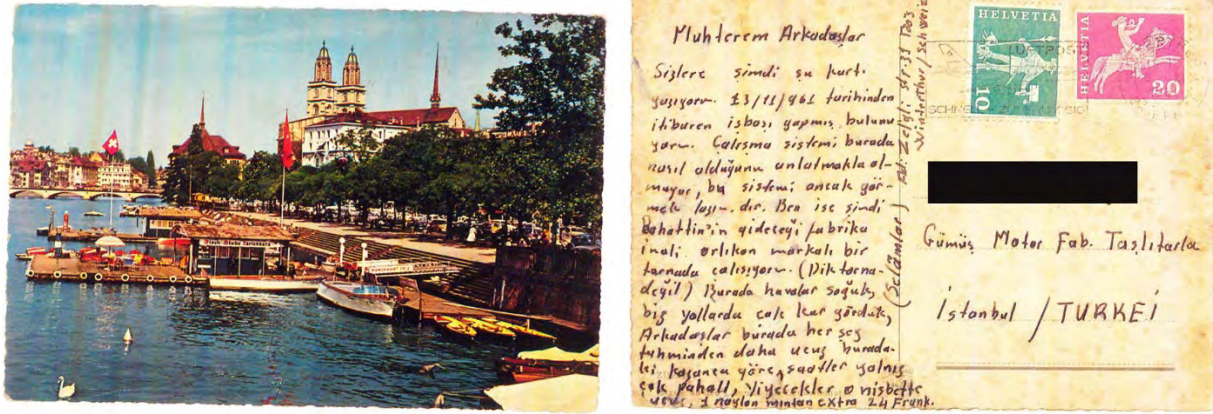
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Figure 1

Postcard from Switzerland that Gives Information about the Life of a Migrant Worker



Then, they were asked to analyze the postcards' visual and verbal content by using primary source analysis handouts. These handouts were used to help students follow a framework in the analysis process and consisted of questions that changed according to the format of the source. While students were working on the postcards, the smartboard was also used to project all the postcards of the six groups. At the end of the analysis, each group discussed their answers and mentioned different reasons for migration.

Figure 2

Postcard from the U.S. about the Life of a Student Who Migrated to Michigan

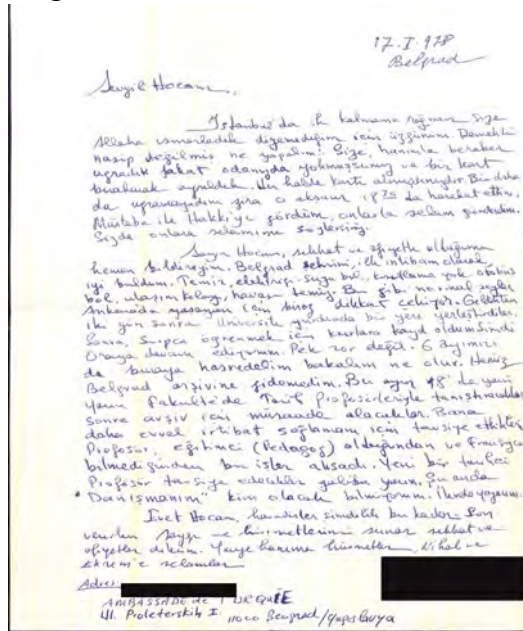


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Figure 3
Letter from a Young Academician from Belgrade, Serbia



Another activity that received great attention involved letters focusing on a different type of migration: brain drain. Two letters reflecting brain drain from Turkey to Western countries were analyzed by the students. One was the letter of an engineer who migrated to Germany to work; he talked about his life, his work, and the difficulties he faced in Germany. The second letter (See Figure 3) was written by a young academician who went to Belgrade, former Yugoslavia, to get a postdoctoral education; he compared the two countries in terms of living standards. After the students explored and analyzed this letter, they discussed the consequences of brain drain from Turkey, such as losing highly qualified people, and why well-educated people would migrate to other countries, along with solutions and recommendations to fix the issues.

Data Collecting Tools

Semi-structured interviews, field observation notes, and the primary source analysis handouts were data collection tools for this study. Data collecting tools were created after thorough examination of the literature. Primary source analysis handouts were mostly created based on Library of Congress guidelines (LOC, n.d). Interview questions were created based on research questions and were discussed and modified several times by the authors. Finally, a Turkish language expert provided assistance in terms of ensuring the clarity of the interview questions and the analysis handouts.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection tool due to their general flexibility allowing the participants to express themselves more clearly than in structured interviews. In addition to this, semi-structured interviews make it easier for the researcher to generate new questions during the interview (Merriam, 2009). Interview questions were prepared separately for both the participant teacher and the students. The interviews were also

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conducted after the instructional plan was applied in the classroom and were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Interviews with all participants were held in January 2019; to uncover more in-depth perspectives regarding some issues that had been raised during the data analysis, a second interview was held with the participant teacher in December 2019.

Primary Source Analysis Handouts

During the implementation of activities, students were given handouts to analyze the primary sources. These handouts were used in most of the activities and were generated by examining the literature on primary sources. Questions on handouts were designed from easy to difficult. The first questions were focused on analyzing the physical features of the primary sources, followed by questions that enabled students to make inferences from the primary source and make comments about it.

Field Observation Notes

One of the researchers was physically present in the classroom during the five weeks in which the activities were implemented and took observational field notes when following the process. At the end of each day, researchers documented various issues such as the performance of the class during the activities, questions posed by the students, problems encountered related to the applications of activities, and how problems were solved.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was performed on the data collected. The rationale for using this technique is to explore the data more closely by adopting an approach from piece to general (Merriam, 2009). In this process, the NVivo 12 Pro qualitative analysis software was used.

Interview sessions were transcribed verbatim and separate computer files were created for the teacher and each student as MS Word documents. Audio files obtained from students and teachers were added to these files, and these recordings were transcribed. Pseudonyms were given to each participant. All files were uploaded into the NVivo 12 Pro software; the same process was done for the field notes as well. Agar (1996) suggests reading the transcripts several times to get a general sense of interviews before breaking them into parts. Through this process, writing memos in the margins of the field notes and/or transcripts is helpful to explore the data (Creswell, 2014). Accordingly, classroom observation notes and interview transcriptions were read as a first step in the beginning data analysis. Following this, the interviews of the students were analyzed. In this process, the lines in the interview file of each student were read and

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analyzed one by one, and codes were issued. For each code, reference files were created by using excerpts obtained from the interviews of the students. After that, repetitive codes were edited, sub-codes were built, similar codes were edited, some codes were divided, and some were deleted. Then, the relationships between the codes were examined and the headings were formed. During this process, both researchers negotiated constantly over the codes and categories to reach the most refined version of codes.

The data was repeatedly used for the analysis of student handouts and field notes. The NVivo program was utilized for the analysis of field notes as in the interviews. As a result of the analysis, the codes obtained from the data were combined with the codes that emerged from the interviews and, eventually, the code tree was revised accordingly. When interpreting the findings of the study, excerpts from all data sources and key quotes were also included to increase the clarity of the meaning for the audience.

Findings

How do Students Interpret their Experiences about the Activities they have Done with Primary Sources in the Course?

Evaluation of Students' Positive Opinions on the Use of Primary Source-based Activities within the Social Studies Course

Making the course more understandable: The data analysis clearly shows that the majority of the interviewed students tended to believe that primary source-based activities made the course more understandable in terms of solving the issues caused by using the textbook as the only teaching source; in particular, the use of primary sources helped students contextualize past events. As a result, most of the interviewed participants stated that the teaching unit was much more understandable compared to other units taught using only textbooks.

If we had learned the topic via textbook, as usual, I would not have understood [the lesson that much], but I understood it better with these activities. When we use the textbook, I feel sleepy sometimes. With these activities, [I think] I comprehended the lesson [better]. I [even] started to study harder [for the course]. (Mehmet)

Similar opinions were expressed by one of the inclusive students, too:

I understood it better through the way you taught [this lesson]. I think learning in this way is better because I cannot understand when we use just the textbook.

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These findings show that, compared to textbook-based teaching, activities based on primary sources can increase the level of understanding of the subjects covered for students regardless of their individual level of success. This is also reflected in the results of the exam for the teaching unit. Even those of lower academic standing were able to make an interpretation of the topic, as the teacher pointed out in the second interview:

I saw that even students who show low academic success were able to do those questions [on the exam]. Our inclusive students who did not show interest in social studies lessons before the study were also successful. Although I asked them interpretation questions, they remembered the reasons for the migration [while answering the exam questions] because they already have found that while they were studying the primary sources. In the exam, I had questions about the stories in the letters or the difficulties that people had there. When you look at the examples they gave, you can be sure that they remembered and wrote from there [primary sources]. (Second interview, Dec. 2019)

Furthermore, we found that the possibility of establishing physical contact with primary sources is another point that makes the course more understandable.

For instance, you brought old letters. I would not have understood or believed that the letters were old if you directly taught us. But you handed over the letters and I examined [them]. After that, I think I understood the [teaching unit] better. I think there would not be a question left in my mind if the other units had worked like this. (Ezgi)

Other students' responses point out that primary sources used in these lessons reflected the characteristics of the period in which they were produced and helped them to connect with the past more easily and to better understand the period studied. As these sources reflect the stories, emotions, and thoughts of ordinary people who usually do not have a place in textbooks, their use makes the topics more appealing for students, which also leads them to connect with the past on a more personal level. The participant teacher also stressed the importance of focusing on real people's lives through primary sources.

Especially reviewing old newspapers, the 3 Generation activity, and the postcard analysis... I think these activities should be included in the curriculum because they were much more effective for the student to see that period directly, to see and understand the [common] words and writing styles used in that period, and students can get to know [an ordinary] worker or the emigrant of that period (First interview, Jan. 2019) ... I think this is the most important side of using primary sources for the students. They [students]

Corresponding author: melisa.akbulut@ogr.iu.edu.tr

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feel they are touching the past. Before [the study] they were not capable of imagining the difficulties that immigrants faced. (Second interview, Dec. 2019)

Including real stories of ordinary people in the course can help students comprehend the studied period. Since the evidence reflects the conditions of the period, the students can evaluate the period on their own and thus both understand the subject and empathize with the personalities under historical investigation.

Increasing students' interest in the course: Study findings show that 72.2 percent of the interviewed participants stated that primary source-based activities activated their curiosity and made the course livelier as students engaged in multiple actions such as reading, analyzing, and discussion. In particular, the primary sources used in the activities were open to interpretation, and their authenticity and physical characteristics captured the attention of the students.

I was intrigued by the photos; [actually] finding the hidden details in those photos. I was very interested in what the kid [in the photo] was doing. In fact, the mysteriousness in the photo caught my attention because we could not see what that kid was doing there. (Metem)

By analyzing the sources, students could find new information that could not be seen at first glance; this stimulated the students' curiosity, thus transforming the course into processing, investigation, and discovery of the unknown. Some features of the primary sources such as physical characteristics, the language used, the style of the handwriting, or the stamps on the envelopes and the postcards were also objects of attention and interest for the students in general.

The letter had handwriting. They [the authors] actually wrote it themselves. It was pretty old. It was the letter that caught my attention the most. (Ada)

In addition, participants highlighted the authenticity of sources. Using these sources, experiences on the subject are explained through the words of the persons themselves. These sources allowed students to work with real evidence instead of creating an artificial classroom atmosphere. Thus, the course became more interesting. This can also be traced in the field notes:

Then the postcard activity was run. Different postcards and source analysis handouts were distributed to each group. The students asked me where I found them. There was a lot of interest. Students were surprised by the authenticity of the document. They were excited and rushed to look and touch the postcards as soon as they could. They also

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wanted to see the postcards of the students in other groups. (Third-week observation notes)

The fact that students asked questions about the source of the documents is an indication of their curiosity. Furthermore, these resources were physically given to them instead of being projected on a computer. Giving students the opportunity to physically hold these resources was met with interest.

I loved those documents. After all, we had the paper, the documents that people wrote [in the past]. It was very nice. ... People wrote on that paper, took it into their own hands, and [now] we also touched and examined the [very] same paper! I enjoyed this very much. (Deniz)

Thus, reviewing students' responses and classroom observation notes, findings show that the students were very excited and curious to interact with primary sources, which led to them to carefully investigate the documents provided. Similarly, the course teacher highlighted student engagement via the comparison of the different classrooms that were taught the same topic.

I would say that the attention span of students was different. When I talked about the topic to class 7C, they became distracted faster because I continued with my usual method. My usual method: I talk about the topic, then we continue through the textbook, then if we have time, we watch the slides and the videos from Morpa² and EBA³. Then we do the activities both in the book and in EBA and Morpa. Of course, the class started to lose attention gradually; but I did not encounter anything like that in the class 7G [study group] because they worked with primary sources. Let us say there are 30 minutes of our review time, they [7G] were with me for 30 minutes. This is the most obvious difference. (Second interview, Dec. 2019)

The teacher's statements show that primary source-based activities not only increased the students' interest in the course but also extended their attention span. Data shows that this has a positive influence on student motivation and participation.

² A platform for supporting primary and middle school students and teachers in lessons, with thousands of contents in accordance with the national curriculum.

³ Educational informatics network established by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Turkey.

Increasing student participation and increasing motivation: More than half of the interviewed participants stated that their participation increased due to the activities. Even students who did not engage much in the coursework before said that the activities positively affected the in-class participation of both themselves and their friends.

Before you came here, the Social Studies course was a little boring, there was nothing [interesting], we were just following the textbook. We started having more fun after you came. There was a lot of participation [after you came to the classroom]. Even those who did not participate in the class before started to participate from time to time. Like Uraz [inclusive student]. (Zeynep)

This comment shows that even less-motivated students can be successfully engaged when primary sources are used. The increased participation of students through primary source-based activities was visible to the students themselves. In addition, students appeared to be eager to share their ideas, thus confirming the beneficial effect of the use of primary sources on the pupils' self-expression. In this context, the use of primary sources appeared to generate increased active participation, one of the goals of constructivist education. This is also reflected in the views of the teacher:

All of the activities were activities where the teacher was only a guide and the student found [the details] through his or her own effort. That is the way you set up the activities, I guess. I mean, they were totally discovering it themselves. We were just leading [the students] with questions. They were not very used to it. [Nevertheless], doing this became a factor that increased their participation [in the class]. The more they felt they had achieved it, the more they began to participate. I'd say their participation increased day by day. It even increased from the first activity through the second one. (First interview, Jan. 2019)

We observed that students can discover the information contained in the primary sources themselves and that this causes them to experience a sense of achievement while increasing their motivation for actively engaging in the course. The teacher, on the other hand, becomes a guide leading them in this process when necessary, in line with the constructivist educational approach and with the social studies curriculum that adopts this educational method. The increase in participation in the course also found its place in the field notes:

The newspaper was presented on the smartboard. There is high participation. Both boys and girls are participating in the class equally. Inclusive students are also actively

Corresponding author: melisa.akbulut@ogr.iu.edu.tr

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participating. The teacher asks questions about the document. When the teacher asks the students whether they could leave their families and go to work in another country, participation increases even more. (Observation notes third week)

Data also shows that the upward trend in student participation positively affected the students' opinions of the course. Some participants stated that after the activities they liked the lesson more.

We were learning [the lesson] better with activities. We were learning while having fun, doing group work together, taking responsibility. It was so nice. This made me love the lesson. We could talk, say what we wanted, ask questions, learn things, have fun. (Utku)

When we were taught only based on the textbook, not only did we not understand the subject very much but also the lesson got boring. For example, when we did these activities, I liked the lesson more and tried to understand it. Social studies was the least favorite subject of mine. I did not understand the lesson because I never understand history [very much]. But after these activities, I liked it more. (Berna)

Based on these comments, we can say that primary sources have the potential to motivate students who do not like social studies. Thanks to the activities, as participation increases, students find a place to express their opinions and history becomes more comprehensible; therefore, students develop a more positive attitude toward social studies.

Fostering and nurturing empathy skills of students: Research shows that primary sources that reflect the true stories and emotions of ordinary people, especially those not featured much in textbooks, make it easier for students to feel empathy as they explore the primary sources that portray them (Hutchinson, 2005; Gilliland-Swetland et al., 1999; Yilmaz, 2008). Both the students and the course teacher expressed this point in the interviews: Through the activities, students could understand the feelings of people who lived in the past. The human emotions reflected by these individuals reciprocated and facilitated the establishment of empathy in the students. The social studies teacher's comments also show that the activities indeed allowed students to empathize:

[They] listened to the stories from the mouths of those people. I think the fact that the kids [in the classroom] listened to the stories [directly from those people and with their own words], which included messages that they wanted to convey to their families, maybe to their teachers, or whoever they had sent them, made the children develop a

little bit of empathy. In the next part of the lesson, during the discussion over [the activity], [the students] would begin [their sentences]: “If it was me...” (First interview, Jan. 2019)

Much greater change in empathic behavior was reported by the teacher in the final interview:

The students empathized with the children who had an immigrational background in their own classrooms. We did not have too many problems in that class, like teasing Syrian students or freezing them out, but there were a few students who did that. They stopped doing that [afterwards]. Remember Funda, who was moved to tears in our class? Our Syrian student. She had a hard migration story. After she was moved to tears, kids stopped teasing the Syrian students; I mean in that class, we never again observed any Syrian students being exposed to discrimination related to their migration process or not being from Turkey. (Second interview, Dec. 2019)

As we can see, the primary source-based activities helped students to empathize not only with people in historical documents but also with their classmates. Learning real stories of ordinary people, listening to them, and hearing the sorrows they had to endure created empathy that spread from individuals to the entire classroom.

Issues Raised During the Application of these Activities and Solution Recommendations

The vast majority of the issues raised regarding the usage of primary source-based activities for teaching related to working in study groups. Fifteen out of 18 interviewed participants expressed negative opinions about the study groups, mostly relating to the uneven distribution of tasks and workload and the lack of coordination among group members.

For example, the friends in our group were not connected to each other. Everyone was doing it their own way. One of them said that I will do it myself, the other said that you cannot do it ... there were problems. (Mehmet)

My friends [in the study group] argued a lot. For example, when we needed to read something, they argued, saying, “I will read that, I want to do this task.” They argued about little problems, but we did not want to solve them with our teacher, we wanted to solve them ourselves. (Ada)

The teacher also recognized the need to improve how group-work was assigned and distributed:

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I could have identified the groups better. I kept the groups fixed for each activity, but I could change the groups from activity to activity. These groups were suitable for the map activity, maybe, but they had to be changed for others. So, I made a mistake there. I do not think I was able to create [the study groups] heterogeneously. Some of the groups happened to be homogeneous. Some groups were made up of students from the lower achievement levels. I think I could not arrange it [the study group] very well. (Second interview, Dec. 2019)

In this study, task distribution within the groups was not made by the researcher, and students were left to figure that out by themselves. The number of participants in the groups was determined as five people on average, due to the class being so crowded, and some sources had a limited number of originals; however, the data indicates that group arrangements should have been made more carefully. It is remarkable that even though 15 out of the 18 participants expressed negative opinions about the study groups, only three suggested rearranging the groups. We observed that despite conflicts in the groups, most of the students were able to overcome the problems using one of three main ways: (a) trying to solve it within the group by talking with each other; (b) asking for support from the teacher; or (c) asking for support from the researcher. The first author was present in the classroom from the beginning to the end of the implementation phase. This might have led the pupils to view the researcher as a teacher, and so some of the students directed questions to her. The teacher herself indicated that she tried to solve the problems by negotiating and changing the place of the students, while the researcher tried to solve it only by negotiating.

I argued with one of my group friends on the answers to the questions. She said the answers were correct and I said the opposite. I told her that I did not trust her answers. She was offended and we argued. Then, we talked to each other and calmed down. We solved the problem by talking. (Deniz)

My groupmates argued a lot. For instance, when they needed to read something on the handout, they competed against each other. They argued about little things. They got angry with each other, but we did not want to solve it through the teacher. We wanted to solve it within the group, so we tried to understand each other, and we eventually solved the problem. (Ada)

Student statements show that even though they are not used to working in groups, they were able to settle conflicts. Another problem that participants faced was time. Some of the students

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stated that they wanted to spend more time with the documents and that the duration given for some of the activities was not enough. On the other hand, one of the students stated that the time issue was not caused by activities but from group friends:

We had two Syrian friends in our group. We were running late because we could not explain it [the activity and group task to them]. We did not have enough time. (Gizem)

During the research, students who did not speak Turkish were distributed into groups that had students who could translate; however, this led to time issues due to the time required for all the necessary translations. The time issue was further mentioned by the teacher:

My biggest problem was time because they were all having fun and they all wanted to have a say. Especially when we were sharing thoughts at the end of the activities, they all wanted to have a say. So, I had trouble with the time. (First interview, Jan. 2019)

These issues highlight the necessity of achieving a balance between promoting student participation and allowing everyone to have a say while also conducting the activities in their entirety within the limited time available. Another issue raised during the activities was that participants had problems with the readability of certain images. One complaint was related to the font size of the texts and another was about the low resolution of some of the primary sources, suggesting that an arrangement should be made to improve visuals. This was specifically aimed at the size of the text in the map activity. This concern was shared by the students and the teacher.

While examining negative opinions, four of the 18 students involved in the primary source-based activities found the map activity too easy and evaluated it as inadequate. This highlights that different levels of achievement among students might result in alternative evaluations of the effectiveness of the activities. Another issue raised by some of the participants was that the number of visual sources used for the activities was insufficient. This may be related to some students needing more visuals to be able to learn. Additionally, a student expressed a negative opinion on the format of the questions, which lacked uniqueness:

The questions could have been a little more original. Some of the questions seemed clichéd. For example, there were questions of emotion, what feelings did you feel, how would you feel, etc.; these are questions that could come up anywhere. Questions I have seen a lot before. So, it sounds a little cliché to me. (Nehir)

Each analysis form contained questions that varied according to the source, but students' opinions can be interpreted as a better way to develop these questions. Among the suggestions that students made to make the activities more effective was the use of other formats such as animations of the period covered (three participants) or jigsaw puzzles (one student).

How does the Teacher Interpret her Experiences About the Activities she did with Primary Sources in the Course?

The teacher's views on primary source-based activities mostly match the students' views. From an educational perspective, the teacher also claimed that primary source-based activities made the course easier to teach. It is worth noting that the teacher's attitude toward using primary sources was initially negative before the research and that she avoided using them due to various concerns:

I was not using primary sources in my classes. I could not do any extra work because of the anxiety of completing the subjects in the curriculum. I was just using the textbook, Morpa Campus and the EBA. The textbook contains only news as a primary source. Maybe I can count the maps for geography. Morpa and EBA usually do not even have newspaper coverage. I did not see it quite possible to get a primary source and examine it, you know. Honestly, it did not seem like much I could do. I was thinking that it would be a lot of work to do for me. I did not believe that I could bring primary sources to the class, so I was not going to do it at all, but I am going to try it right now, frankly. I am thinking of trying it in other units after that. (First interview, Jan. 2019)

These statements indicate that the teacher's willingness to use these sources prior to activities was quite limited and that she did not attempt to use them unless they were readily provided in the textbook. Prior to the activities, the teacher did not believe that these sources could be used in the courses, mostly due to time constraints and the work of preparing the activities. However, after the activities applied in her classroom, the teacher realized that the use of these resources were not as challenging as she initially thought; rather, these resources could indeed be useful and could make the course easier to teach. The teacher's subsequent statements reflect this situation better:

Normally, when I was lecturing, I was talking about the subject, then I was getting the answer. But in the activities, the answers were already embedded. The students found answers to all the questions in their mind because they could visualize everything by examining the source firsthand. As a teacher, this has taken off some of my workload.

Corresponding author: melisa.akbulut@ogr.iu.edu.tr

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What made it easier besides that? I did not make an effort to write on the board, then repeat through the textbook, then go through the slide; but with primary source-based activities, the students had already comprehended the topic [right away by exploring the primary sources]. I think this is the magic of primary sources. (Second interview, Dec. 2019)

When we interviewed the teacher for the second time, she stated that after our study she tried to continue to use primary sources in her lessons.

While teaching about first scripts/writing, I used a website called www.arkeofili.com. I showed the students the first written love letter, the first written commercial treaty and the first rental contract... For instance, when we covered computers as a course topic, I showed them Eniac [the first computer] and the technological development of laptops using the Apple website. I utilized [primary sources] a lot while teaching these [topics]. I would not have even imagined [using them]. To be honest, if I would have taught these units before getting involved in your study, I would have probably gone through the topics summarily since they do not contain challenging information. I would have done a few little activities by using Morpa. But afterwards, since I had discovered primary sources grab students' attention, I used a lot of different examples from different websites. (Second interview, Dec. 2019)

The teacher's statements show that after this study, she tried to use online primary sources. Her earlier negative opinions had changed, and she voluntarily included these sources in her lessons. These comments are important to see that primary source-based activities might break down the prejudices of educators who think that these sources are tedious and difficult to use in lessons.

Discussion

Our study illustrates that the use of primary sources in the social studies course was considered as a positive experience by the participants in many different aspects. A significant portion of the interviewed participants (72.2%) stated that they understood the lesson better thanks to primary source-based activities. The activities performed using primary sources were more understandable, and the monotonous classroom atmosphere created by using a single resource (i.e., textbook) was lifted. Similar results were reported in other studies that support our conclusion (Dilek, 2009; Eamon, 2006; Lawlor, 2003). Likewise, Barton (2005) points out that lessons should be taught using multiple sources. In this way, the different primary sources can complement textbooks and may provide additional data that textbooks lack; they may also help

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the students to better visualize the period they are working on. As a result, students have a better understanding of the period being studied.

As Wooden (2008) stated, “the past is more like a foreign country than a familiar place, the only way to come close to understanding the thoughts and actions of people in the past is to reconstruct the time in which they lived” (p. 23). This is possible with primary sources because these sources reflect the period in which they were created, so students can more easily visualize the historical period in question in their minds (Açıklan, 2018; Van Fossen & Shiveley, 2000). In addition, primary sources help students establish a physical and personal connection between the present and the past, as they are created by people who have lived (Barton, 2005). This makes history more concrete for students (Hatcher, 1992). The research participants made this clear in their views and stated that the sources provided a greater understanding of historical events. This study revealed that through activities based on primary sources, participants were able to appreciate the characteristics of the time under investigation with a greater degree of empathy toward both those who created the original source and the period when it was created. The teacher also stated that learning the events directly from the people who experienced them made it easier for students to comprehend the studied period.

Primary source-based activities made the course more interesting for the participants. Physical characteristics such as the fact that the sources were real, old, and handwritten appeared to be very interesting for the participants. This has been pointed out by both students and the course teacher. Many studies on the subject also support that if primary sources are used appropriately, they build a sense of curiosity in the participants (Açıklan, 2018; Lawlor, 2003; Sandwell, 2008; Ünlüer & Yaşar, 2012).

The primary source-based activities used in this study increased the level of participation in the course. Many students expressed in the interviews that both their individual and classmates’ participation increased. The social studies teacher also confirmed that student participation increased; she was merely a guide during the activities, and the students reached their own judgments as a result of their analysis. This is important to show that students can become more active in courses through primary sources and move from a passive position of receiving knowledge to an active position of producing knowledge, which is in line with the basic philosophy of constructivism. Increased participation is an indication that students can express themselves. Research conducted by Ensminger and Fry (2012) also showed that students can form their own ideas and express themselves throughout their studies with primary sources. Similar results were also reached in studies by Hutchinson (2005) and Ünlüer and Yaşar (2012).

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The findings indicate that thoughts about social studies subjects have positively changed and that even students who had low motivation in the course began to like it. Thanks to primary sources, the students' motivation for the lesson increased. That primary sources can potentially boost the motivation of students in class and make the lesson more enjoyable has also been reflected in various studies (Gilliland-Swetland et al., 1999; Morris, 2002; Patterson et al., 2017). Studies have illustrated that integrating primary sources into lessons can be fruitful and can provide rich learning experiences while simultaneously making the lessons more enjoyable for the students.

The fact that activities centered on analyzing primary source material enhances empathy among learners is another positive feature reflected in the feedback of the participants. Sources in which people reflected their feelings, such as letters and postcards, impressed participants and made it easier for them to empathize with the people of the era under historical analysis. The literature also shows that these sources can help students understand the political, social, and cultural realities of a time period and the ideas, assumptions, and attitudes of the people who produced them (Hatcher, 1992). Conclusions on how these sources can improve empathy skills have also been put forward by Hutchinson (2005). In his research, using letters from the American Civil War, he eventually found that students could see the realities of the war, put themselves in the place of the soldiers who lived at the time, and better understand the period. These sources illuminate the lives of ordinary people not frequently included in textbooks, presenting a bottom-up view of history where students can appreciate the past not just as the story of great men (Eamon, 2006). Similarly, other studies in the field have also shown that primary sources support the development of empathy in students (Gilliland-Swetland et al., 1999; Yilmaz, 2008). Given the emphasis placed on gaining empathy skills in the social studies curriculum, our study supports the notion that progress can be made in achieving the objectives of the syllabus with these sources.

The study demonstrates that primary source-based activities positively changed the teacher's preconceptions about their usefulness in the classroom. The participating teacher stated that she had known about primary sources before the research, but she did not consider or believe it possible to use these resources in her lessons. Teachers' opinions and beliefs about what and how students should learn determine the materials and methods they will use in education (Gilliland-Swetland et al., 1999). However, the teachers who lead students to think through evidence are in the minority (Hicks et al., 2004). Teachers' lack of special training on how to use these resources (Ensminger & Fry, 2012) lead them to view the use of primary sources with a degree of skepticism and to disregard the many educational benefits that these resources can

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provide. In our case, the participant teacher was an appropriate example of this commonly held belief regarding primary source-based teaching. Nevertheless, we observed toward the end of this study that the prejudices held by the teacher in terms of the adoption of primary sources in teaching started to dissipate, and she even started to integrate primary sources in her lesson plans after our study. A similar result was also revealed in the studies by Alarcon, Holmes, and Bybee (2015) and Ensminger and Fry (2012).

Looking at the shortcomings of using primary sources in this study, we found that the most negative views were attributed to workflow and the distribution of workloads when the students studied together in groups. A more careful consideration of group formation and the distribution of tasks, as pointed out by both the teacher and the students, should be observed in future activities. Suggestions from participants, such as working with groups of fewer people (Potter, 2004), an added focus on individual studies, and changing group members according to the activities, can all be used in subsequent research in the field. Another issue related to the use of primary sources in teaching involves the effective use of time. Research has shown that students' ability to study these sources extensively may be more useful in answering analysis questions. Hatcher (1992) similarly mentioned the time required to study the resources in detail by the students. The increase in the participation of the students and the teacher's attempts to give every student the right to have a say was a contributing factor to the timing issues. In light of this, the teacher will have to take time management into account when planning future lessons. There is evidence of this in the suggestions made by teachers and students regarding the time problem. The participants stated the time could have been handled better and that they should have been given more time to study some of the sources.

Conclusion

The students and the teacher in this study had limited experience with primary sources. The teacher had preconceptions and worries about integrating these sources into the curriculum. However, after participating in this study, both the teacher and the students developed mostly positive opinions towards primary source-based social studies education. Contrary to the initial skepticism of the teacher, this study has demonstrated that primary source-based activities can be easily applied in social studies education. Despite the lack of experience and a crowded classroom, students were able to comprehend, examine, and analyze the sources. Thus, while this study shows that primary source-based social studies education is possible, it also indicates that more attention to such studies is needed to extend the use of these sources.

Corresponding author: melisa.akbulut@ogr.iu.edu.tr

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There are some drawbacks of this study. The study was conducted with a small group of seventh graders. Similar studies could be done with larger groups and different ages to gather more data in order to compare the findings from different school levels and settings. Another limitation was that primary source-based instruction was only applied within one teaching unit in this study. We hope that more studies investigating the use of primary source-based instruction on various topics and different grade levels can be done in the future so that this might help to make the use of primary sources in education more prevalent in Turkey.

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About the Authors:

Melisa AKBULUT graduated from the department of social studies education at Istanbul University – Cerrahpaşa, Turkey in 2019 with a Master’s degree. She has bachelor’s degrees in social studies (Istanbul University, 2015) and she is studying English translation and interpreting (Istanbul University). Currently she works as a teacher at a private school in Istanbul-Turkey

Dr. Mehmet AÇIKALIN is a Professor in the Department of Social Studies Education at İstanbul University -Cerrahpaşa. He received his Master’s degree from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2002 and his Ph.D. from The Ohio State University in 2006. His dissertation is entitled “The influence of computer-supported instruction (CSI) on the principles of constructivist pedagogy.” His research interests are computer-supported instruction in social studies, global education, and social studies teacher education. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9861-5024>

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