Teacher's Role and Autonomy in Instructional Planning: The Case of Secondary School History Teachers with regard to the Preparation and Implementation of Annual Instructional Plans

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Abstract

This study seeks to analyze the role of history teachers in instructional planning and their areas of autonomy in Turkey. The concept of teacher autonomy briefly refers to the authority and freedom of teachers in the planning and implementation of the instructional activities and the decisions made during the instructional process. The objective of the present study is to investigate the degree of participation of the teachers in the selection and preparation of the teaching methods, content and materials throughout the preparation and implementation of the annual instructional plans. The study aims to analyze the issue in depth by qualitative research design focusing on a small sampling group consisting 11 participants. The findings have indicated that the role of the teachers in the preparation of the annual instructional plans was quite limited and that the contents of the plans were mostly borrowed from textbooks and the official curriculum. It was also observed that, in the classroom practices, teachers usually reflected their preferences and personal decisions on the instructional process more than what was given in the instructional plans. However, it is difficult to say that this flexibility was able to provide an instructional process designed in line with the classroom realities and the students' learning styles.

Key Words

Instructional Planning, Annual Instructional Plans, History Teaching, Teacher Autonomy.

In the scientific literature, the concept of the teacher autonomy is defined by many scholars and these definitions contain important differences. However, one common ground the different definitions agree on is that the concept of autonomy refers essentially to the freedom and the power of the teachers in their professional activities (Castle, 2004; Friedman, 1999; Pearson & Hall, 1993; Short,

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1994). The teacher autonomy is not confined to the planning and implementing of the teaching activities. It covers equally the improvement of the teachers' role and power in decision-making regarding the regulation of working conditions and school environment, and the management of the human, financial and material sources (Friedman, 1999; Öztürk, 2011a).

The recognition of greater powers for teachers is essential to ensure that they properly carry out their duties and do their assignments. The low degree of power and autonomy assigned to the teachers in the drafting and planning of the teaching methods and contents lie in conflict with the larger sphere of their responsibilities (Ingersoll, 2007). The teacher autonomy is a very important consideration in recognizing teaching as a profession and developing professional teachers. If teachers are to be empowered and regarded as professional individuals,

like medical doctors or lawyers, they must have the power and freedom in their professional practices (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Webb, 2002).

Otherwise, many researchers stress the importance of the balance between the autonomy and the responsibility for the effective functioning of the school activities (Anderson, 1987; Gutmann, 1999). Some researchers (Little, 1990; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005) warn that the autonomy should neither be perceived nor employed as a kind of freedom that keeps teachers away from cooperation with their colleagues and the school management, leaving them in professional isolation.

Teacher Autonomy in Instructional Planning in Turkey

Instructional plans have a crucial function in helping teachers participate in the planning of instructional practices, which enables teachers to create a unique design for their own students. Student-Centered approaches make it necessary that the curriculum programs should be dynamic and be designed in a shape that is conducive to further development and modifications during the implementation process (Galton, 1998). The process of curriculum development does not end with the preparation of curriculum programs; it continues with the teachers' instructional planning activities, finalizing with the actual delivery of the instruction in the classroom (Varış, 1997).

Teachers are usually involved in the nation-wide or school-based curriculum development and renewal activities (Demirel, 2006; White, 1992). But, the main function of teachers during the task of curriculum development comes into the foreground with planning and implementation of instructional activities. According to Connelly (as cited in Ben-Peretz, 1990) teacher still have a crucial role in program development even when they are given the task of implementing a ready-made package program by resorting to their own decisions and modifications while adapting the curriculum according to their specific context and teaching conditions. It is necessary that the teachers are given the possibility to adapt the curricula in line with their own teaching context, so that they can participate actively and effectively to curriculum reform efforts (Johns, 2002). It seems that one of the obstacles for teachers to deal with while making instructional decisions and applying them is limitations on teacher autonomy (Boote, 2006).

The curriculum reform realized in Turkey during 2000's introduced the student-centred approach that aims to diversify the teaching contents and methods according to different needs, interests and levels of the pupils (Eğitim Reformu Girişimi [ERG], 2005; Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], n.d.). This change requires that the teacher adopt the role of a guide whose main duty is to rearrange the teaching context in line with the needs and interests of the particular student group (Özden, 2005). However, the Turkish education system is largely dominated by an approach that defines centrally and very tightly the curriculum planning and its implementation (Yıldırım, 2003; Vorkink, 2006). The implementation of the curriculum reform goals' requires the improvement of the teacher's role and autonomy in defining and planning of the teaching activities.

In the Turkish context, while the in-service teachers' views, attitudes and practices towards the instructional planning is studied thoroughly (e.g. Akpınar & Özer, 2006, 2008; Boyacı, 2009; Can, 2007, 2009; İşman & Eskicumalı, 2003; Şirinkan & Gündoğdu, 2011; Taşdemir, 2006; Yıldırım, 2003; Yıldırım & Öztürk, 2002), these studies do not pay a particular attention to issue of teacher autonomy. Moreover, with a few exceptions (e.g. Öztürk, 2011b), curriculum reform has not been studied from the perspective of teacher autonomy. In Turkey, the concept of teacher autonomy is studied very mostly in the context of foreign language teaching (e.g. Sert, 2007; Üstünlüoğlu, 2009).

Purpose

This study aims to explore secondary school history teachers' experiences during the process of the development of instructional plans and its application, with a focus on the teachers' role and autonomy in this process. The study attempts to examine the teachers' influence in instructional planning, their roles in the selection of the contents of instructional activities, methods and materials and also the problems that arise, linking them with the hidden factors that path the way for these troubles. Furthermore, the study has also focused on the implementation of the annual instructional plans, thus managing to shed light on the differences between the official curriculum and operational curriculum (Posner, 1995) that is actually taking place in schools.

Method

This study has adopted a case study design as its methodology. Case study methodology involves an

in-depth examination of a single instance or event. Despite its inability to offer generalizable findings, they provide in-depth explanations and descriptions in the analysis of educational problems (Mertler & Charles, 2005).

Sampling

In this study, the participants were selected from history teachers at secondary schools in Çanakkale, a city in western Turkey, and one of its districts, Bayramiç. A total of 11 teachers participated in the study, six of them were female and five of them were male.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the data collection purposes, a triangulation of three techniques was used in the study: interview, observation in the field, and document analysis (Punch, 2005; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2004). Triangulation refers to the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon. It was deemed to be necessary to use a variety of data collection techniques to be able to diversify the types of data and to be able to offer different perspectives on the issue. Triangulation is used frequently in case studies (Cohen & Manion, 1994).

The data analyzed in the study were collected during the spring term of 2010 and lasted about a month. For the document analysis part of the study, the teachers were asked to provide the researcher with their annual instructional plans of history courses. The document analysis includes also official history curriculum (MEB, 2008) and other relevant documents regulating the instructional planning (MEB, 2003, 2005, 2009). Finally, some of the history textbooks were also investigated (e.g. Cazgır, Genç, Çelik, Genç, & Türedi, 2009).

Discussion

The findings indicate that the teachers, participating in this study, have a limited influence on the preparation of the instructional plans. The contents of the annual instructional plans are usually taken -as they are- from the official curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education and the textbooks. Thus it is evident that the preferences and decisions of the teachers are rarely reflected in the preparation of course materials and instructional plans. Hence, the needs and learning styles of the students are not taken into consideration. These findings support

the results of the earlier studies (Akpınar & Özer, 2006, 2008; Boyacı, 2009; Yıldırım, 2003).

However, the case is quite different when it comes to the implementation of the plans and real instructional practices taking place in the classroom context. During the application phase, teacher are able to reflect their own preferences and decisions on the instructional activities and their teaching styles more than prescribed in the annual instructional plans. In other words, it has been observed that teachers have a larger area of autonomy in the application stage, which is made possible by the privacy nature of the classroom environment, which is partially detached from the effects of the outer world. The classroom environment provides the teacher with a certain degree of autonomy because the teacher is the unique authority in his classroom and there is hardly any direct control and supervision on his activities, with a few exceptions like the official supervision procedures done by the Ministry. This phenomenon that Bidwell (as cited in Gamoran, Secada, & Marrett, 2000) describes using the term of *structural looseness* is a characteristic of the teacher profession. However, we cannot say that this autonomy and flexibility in the classroom practices were able to provide an instructional process designed in line with the students' needs, expectations and learning styles. Particularly, in the classes accommodating students with learning difficulties, it has been observed that many problems have arisen with regard to the application of the annual instructional plans. The teacher flexibility in the application process does not suffice to bridge the gap between instructional plans and classroom realities.

The teacher flexibility in the application process, as observed on the teacher participant group, has resulted in different practices in terms of the selection of course contents and materials as well as the teaching techniques. While the teachers were more dependent on the official curriculum in the selection of course contents, they were more able to reflect their own decisions and preferences on the selection of teaching methods and materials.

According to the results of some studies (Eurydice, 2008; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2005), in the most of the European countries, the course contents are defined by official curricula and, thus the degree of autonomy allowed to teachers depends basically to organization of the curricula. In this sense, the flexibility of the official curricula is of great importance. It is essential that the curriculum be flexible and leaves some space for

the teacher so that the teachers can reflect their individual preferences on their teaching practices (Hesapçıoğlu, 2008). In context of the teachers participating in this study, the lack of flexibility in Turkish history curriculum is a very important factor effecting teachers' instructional planning activities. Regarding the selection of course contents in particular, the high density of the official curriculum contents appears as one of the basic obstacles for improving teachers' role and autonomy in instructional planning.

In the literature, it is said that there is a link between teacher contributions to curriculum development process and their degree of professional development (Macpherson, Brooker, Aspland, & Elliott, 1999). The professional development is also prerequisite to effectively put into practice the teacher autonomy (Steh & Pozarnik, 2005). The findings of the study have revealed that there are some differences among the teachers in terms of the level of participation in the planning and improvement of the instructional practices. It has been observed that the contributions of teachers, with sufficient knowledge, skills and motivation, to the effective use of the new teaching methods and materials are at a higher level.

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