

Learner-centred instruction as a means to realise democratic education: The problems and constraints confronting learner-centred instruction in Turkey

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to document the problems and constraints confronting learner-centred instruction in Turkey. To that end, it first explains the link between democracy and education and the role of learner-centred instruction in realising democratic ends. By drawing on John Dewey's report and Turkish scholars' perspectives on Turkish education, the article then presents the problems that pose threats to the implementation of learner-centred instruction. The problems with respect to the Turkish educational system and teacher education programs, and the challenges that in-service teachers and students may experience with learner-centred instruction are explained.

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Introduction

To explore the relationship between democracy and education, a wide range of educational scholars whose disciplinary training, philosophical and political orientations differ from one another have posed and sought answers to the following types of questions: What does democracy mean? What implications does democracy have for the process of schooling and education? What is the nature of relationship between democracy and education? What are the basic characteristics of democratic education? How can we make the structure and organisation of schools and society more democratic?

The differing and sometimes conflicting answers to these questions show that there is no single, but a variety of definitions of democracy. Some definitions of democracy are more cogent, coherent and comprehensive than others. Different interest groups' definitions and understanding of the conception of democracy, therefore, can be classified along a continuum in terms of their adequacy to explain the meanings and implications of democracy within larger social, cultural and political context. At one end of the continuum the conception of democracy is understood simply as "a form of governance" (Linz & Stepan, 1996, p. 17), at the other end as "a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916, p. 87). It is the latter understanding of democracy that helps us see how democracy and education are interrelated to, and interdependent of, each other. In this sense, democracy is not seen as a completed process once the

democratic type of government is established. Rather, it is seen as a continuing project going hand in hand with education. From this perspective, the goal of education is to create civic unity and democratic citizenship characterised by mutually shared interests (Dewey). Schools are expected to play a central role in realising democracy and democratic ends by enabling the teacher to engage “not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life” (Dewey, 1972, p. 95).

Why learner-centred instruction?

Establishing and sustaining democracy demands the construction of critical and thoughtful individuals. For this reason, one of the fundamental goals of schooling in democratic societies is to help students become responsible, critical, reflective and active citizens who can make informed and reasoned decisions about the societal issues confronting the local and global community respectively. Students are expected to develop a positive disposition toward participatory democracy and to actively engage in the public issues for the common good. In order for students to take the office of citizenship as active and participatory citizens, they need to have the kinds of opportunities that allow them to actively engage in thinking, reasoning and questioning. Since learner-centred instruction urges students to actively construct meaning and understanding during every phase of the learning process, it can serve as an invaluable tool to help realise the vital goals of democratic education. What follows next is the literature that provides support for the argument that learner-centred instruction is the best way to realise democratic education and the democratic growth of the society alike.

As defined by Dewey (1916), democratic society is the one “which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life” (p. 99). And such a democratic society is supposed to “have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder” (Dewey, p. 99). Influenced by John Dewey’s conception of democratic education, Apple and Beane (1995) also described the essential characteristics of democratic education as follows: Democratic schools are characterised by free flow and exchange of ideas including marginal ones; critical thinking and reflection on ideas, opinions, problems and policies; concern both for the public good and for the rights of individuals and minorities; and belief in the individual and collective capacity of people to generate possibilities for resolving problems (pp. 6–7).

Rather than the conservative or traditional construct of schooling geared toward “information accumulation and perpetuation of the existing social order” (Rallis, 1995, p. 225), learner-centred schools are grounded in the construct of “democratic education [that] aims at the empowerment of free and equal citizens, people who are willing and able to share together in shaping their own society” (Gutmann, 1990, p. 19), by promoting “collaboration, caring, and growth, not competition” (Rallis, p. 225). Neither competitive nor punitive practices that impede productivity and growth but collaborative practices characterise educational processes in learner-centred schools. Educators in learner-centred schools aim to “build structures and processes that keep them closely in touch with the needs of each child” through such ways as cultivating caring relationships between themselves and their students and seeking ways to ensure personalised attention to each individual child (Astuto & Clark, 1995, p. 244). Since learner-centred instruction requires school structures that value the principles of freedom,

self-governance, participation and empowerment rather than bureaucracy and control (Astuto & Clark, 1995; Garrison, 2003), the evidence from the theoretical and empirical research in the past two decades clearly shows the superiority of learner-centred schools over traditional or teacher-centred schools in terms of realising democratic education (Astuto & Clark, pp. 244–246).

Kyle and Jenks (2002) cogently articulated the link between learner-centred instructional practices and democratic education:

Most democratic theorists emphasize the constructs of meaningful participation and freedom as two fundamental principles of democracy (p. 152)... There is relatively widespread agreement among democratic and pedagogic theorists that students learn in good part by doing. It is through participation and active engagement in the class, not through rote memorization, that students develop into democratic citizens (p. 155)....

Education agenda driven by a commitment to participatory democracy... entails promoting active, engaged participation in the classroom and—for adult citizens—in democratic governance; facilitating self-development/self-actualization; fostering critical thinking, writing, and reading skills (p. 158).

The literature cited above lucidly indicates that if implemented with integrity, learner-centred instruction has potential to ensure democratic education in that it involves students in making decisions about the learning goals to be reached, the course content to be studied (i.e., what they learn), and the ways in which the course topics are to be learned (i.e., how they learn) and students' learning is to be evaluated. During this process, the teacher:

- helps students set challenging, meaningful, personally and culturally relevant learning activities that not only promote conceptual and analytic thinking but also develop critical and higher order thinking skills;
- provides students with opportunities to collaborate with their peers by employing heterogeneous cooperative learning groups that promote cooperation, shared responsibility, and a sense of belonging;
- gives students increasing responsibility for their learning; i.e., encouraging student autonomy and self-development;
- respects and values students' standpoints; i.e., promoting self-esteem and enhancing tolerant attitudes toward divergent points of view;
- employs both formative and summative assessment techniques to give students feedbacks on their individual growth and progress toward reaching course objectives and goals; i.e., employing holistic evaluation (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Features of learner-centred instruction

What is meant by the concept of learner-centred instruction? How do we come to know that learner-centred instruction is being practiced? Answering these questions involves a conceptual definition of learner-centred instruction. Although the concept of learner-centred education is based on a fluid theoretical framework and subject to change as it is continuously redefined by theorists and applied researchers (Henson, 2003), the models of learner-centred instruction in the research literature have several elements in common. The constructionist

epistemological stance, cognitive-metacognitive, affective, socio-psychological and developmental theories together with progressive theoretical perspectives on education come into play in defining the characteristic features of learner-centred instruction (American Psychological Association's Board of Educational Affairs [APA], 1997; Astuto & Clark, 1995; McCombs & Whisler, 1997)

Learner-centred instruction is a system of instruction based on a student's individual choices, interests, needs, abilities, learning styles, types of intelligences and educational goals within an authentic context where situated thinking is deemed important (APA, 1997; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Weimer, 2002). Building on the knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes that learners bring to the school is a fundamental tenet of learner-centred instruction (Weimer). For this reason, learner-centred instruction approaches the design of instruction from the perspective of the learner rather than the perspective of the teacher. The teacher tailors instruction and subject matter to students' needs, interests and capacities (Dewey, 1916).

Learner-centredness can be defined as “the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners—their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs—with a focus on learning” (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 9). The instructional approach based on the principles of learner-centredness (a) emphasises the student as the main agent of learning; (b) makes student learning the principal goal; (c) concentrates on the use of intentional processes on students' part; (d) encourages teacher-student interaction in which students become more active learners; (e) expects the teacher to act as a facilitator or a guide; (f) focuses on not the frequency of information transmission, but how well students learn; (g) views each phase of instruction in terms of its effects on students' learning (APA, 1997; Fosnot, 1996; Henson, 2003; McCombs & Whisler).

Having described the characteristic features of learner-centred instruction, I will explain whether conditions in Turkey are favourable to practice learner-centred instruction in schools.

Method

I employed two strategies to identify the problems confronting learner-centred education in Turkey. First, I corresponded via emails with Turkish educators at the colleges of education in Turkey and then reviewed the relevant literature on the issue. I resorted to the perspectives of Turkish educators to avoid prioritising the problems in an arbitrary and unilateral fashion. In order not to influence or shape their perspectives, I asked the following open-ended question for them to answer: What kinds of problems are likely to thwart or impede the realisation of learner-centred instruction in secondary school classrooms in Turkey? In follow-up correspondences, I asked more specific questions depending on their answers. Of 54 educators who were contacted, 41 responded to the email inquiry. 29 educators' responses were sufficient enough to provide answers for the question. Each correspondent educator was given pseudonym to protect their identity. Inductive qualitative data analysis was employed to analyse educators' responses (i.e., the development of codes, themes, and categories from the raw data). I selected the sentences and phrases as my units of analysis, which is called line by line analysis, and then began to code the data through the process of open coding. That is, I searched the data in order to identify recurring words, patterns, and themes to be categorised. Once the whole data was fragmented into codes and clustered

together, I began to develop initial categories by looking for similarities or differences within the segmented data. Educators' answers centred on the problems associated with the Turkish educational system, the teacher, and the student, all of which are intertwined with one another (Their responses focused more on the problems as to teachers and students than the problems with the educational system).

Problems confronting learner-centred instruction in Turkey

What kinds of constraints and obstacles confront learner-centred instruction in secondary schools in Turkey? Seeking answers to these questions, the rest of the article deals with the problems as to the Turkish educational system and teacher education programs, and the challenges that in-service teachers and students may experience with learner-centred instruction.

The Turkish educational system

Since the tenets of progressive education lay the theoretical foundation of learner-centred instruction, and John Dewey is the most pre-eminent philosopher in articulating the relationship between democracy and education, Dewey's report on the Turkish education system can prove useful to explain whether the Turkish education system is compatible with democratic education and learner-centred instruction. Even though a long time has passed since the publication of Dewey's report, it stills hold relevant and convincing. "Dewey's report speaks directly to the problems of school systems in all developing countries, today and for many coming decades" (Cohen, 1983, p. XX).

Upon the invitation of the Turkish Ministry of National Education in 1924, Dewey came to Turkey and examined its education system, making forceful recommendations for education reform and policy. His report entitled "Report and Recommendation upon Turkish Education," emphasised the roles of progressive educational theories in improving the quality of education and the need to familiarise teachers with those progressive pedagogies. Dewey quite subtly questioned the integrity of reform efforts that the founders of the Turkish Republic embarked on to transform and reconstruct the educational system through the Law of Unification of Instruction passed in 3 March 1924. That law has entailed the administration of Turkish education via an exceedingly centralised education system that Dewey considered as a threat to democratic education as reflected in his report

While Turkey needs unity in its educational system, it must be remembered that there is a great difference between unity and uniformity, and that a mechanical system of uniformity may be harmful to real unity... Unity is primarily an intellectual matter, rather than an administrative and clerical one. It is to be attained by so equipping and staffing the central Ministry of Public Instruction that it will be the inspiration and leader, rather than dictator of education in Turkey... The central Ministry should stand for unity, but against uniformity and in favour of diversity. Only by diversification of materials can schools be adapted to local conditions and needs and the interest of different localities be enlisted... By giving its chief attention to such intellectual problems, the department will be protected from the danger of degenerating into a routine clerical and

bookkeeping office, and also from the danger of being an arbitrary dictator, arousing the antagonism rather than the cooperation of local school administrators.... (Dewey, 1983, pp. 281–282)

Dewey pointed out that a uniform education system makes it difficult to adjust schools and curriculum to the varying needs of different provinces, urban and rural environments. He accordingly advised that school curriculum be flexible enough to be adapted to the local conditions and needs in different regions of Turkey. If students are to find curriculum interesting and engaging, Dewey suggested, school subjects be connected with students' lives outside school and a mutually supportive relationship between school and its surrounding community be established (Dewey, 1983). Viewing Turkey's strict centralised system of education as an impediment to that end, Dewey forewarned that the centralised system of the Ministry may become bureaucratic, too much preoccupied with formalities and clerical routine work.

Even though more than seven decades has passed since Dewey's recommendations, the Turkish government re-emphasised the importance of the Law of Unification of Instruction and passed new laws to reinforce these outdated laws and approaches to education (Barrows, 1990; Turan, 2000). The Law of Unification of Instruction still remains one of the turning points in efforts to reform and restructure the Turkish education system. Teachers still perform their duties in conformity with the objectives and principles of the centralised educational system. Not only the appointment of teachers to different types of schools, but also school administration and inspection, and in-service training programs are governed by laws and regulations prepared by the Ministry of National Education (Gürşimşek, Kaptan, & Erkan, 1997). Still today, all educational activities in schools are shaped by a rigid national curriculum and are controlled by the supervisors assigned by the Ministry of National Education (Seferoglu, 1996). Teachers are expected to teach the same national curriculum in the different regions of the country (Çakıroğlu & Çakıroğlu, 2003). This practice has a significant adverse impact on schools throughout the country (Karagozoglu, 1991). This centralised system of education is antithetical to learner-centred instruction which necessitates a flexible system of education to accommodate differences in students' backgrounds.

Some educators criticised the Law of Unification of Instruction and its advocates. Turan (2000) contended that those intellectual and political elites who are the supporters of educational uniformity are ignorant of the critical role of pluralistic education in sustaining democratic education. In the light of democratic values, Turan (2000) further argued:

The republican state failed to recognize the importance of the participation of people in decision making. This failure to understand participatory democracy in a pluralistic society has resulted in the creation of an intellectual and political élite who have become gatekeepers of social and political change that might abolish their prerogatives (p. 553).

There has not been any satisfactory progress towards putting Dewey's insightful advice into practice. The unduly centralised structure of elementary and secondary education in Turkey led the policy makers to unconsciously ignore the differences in subcultures of urban and rural communities (Çakıroğlu & Çakıroğlu, 2003). Today's teacher education programs do not consider such fundamental differences in the workplace of teachers, as a result of which teachers experience difficulty

adjusting themselves and their instruction to culturally divergent communities (Çakiroğlu & Çakiroğlu, p. 257).

In short, the present education system in Turkey is not flexible but too centralised in its organisation and structure. Even though learner-centred instruction entails a flexible, open and transparent education system, rigidity rather than flexibility colours the whole education system of Turkey from elementary to undergraduate education. There have been efforts to enhance the effectiveness of the educational system of the country, but these efforts have fallen short of their target due, in large part, to political instability and central management of the Ministry (Erkan, 1992).

A few of the Turkish educators with whom I communicated via emails pointed out the problems with the educational system of the country. Stressing that educational system is a reflection of the society, “where tradition rather than innovation and change has been the norm,” Ms Bulut stated, “The national education system simply does not allow teachers to employ learner-centred instruction. For instance, high-stakes University Qualification Exam presents itself as a great obstacle before learner-centred instruction.” To Mr Cetin, one of the most important problems of the Turkish Education System is its excessive centralised structure:

Curriculum programs are determined by the members of the central governments. And the curriculum developers determine general principles and guidelines not in accordance with new educational developments but with the general principles of the Constitution. There have been a number of educational changes in Turkey. But, these are surface changes. There is almost no change in the essence of the structure of the Turkish education system.

Teacher education in Turkey

Are the conditions in the colleges of education favourable for producing teachers capable of effectively practicing learner-centred instruction? Put it differently; are colleges of education in Turkey capable of producing effective and skilful teachers who possess necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions in order to implement learner-centred instruction? The successful integration of learner-centred instruction into classroom practices depends, in large part, on the quality of teacher education programs. In reference to the colleges of education in Turkey, Dewey stressed “... no real improvement of education can be made without improvement in the preparation of teachers, both in scholarship and in acquaintance with the most progressive and efficient pedagogical methods in use in other parts of the world” (Dewey, 1983, p. 301).

The present teacher education programs in Turkey are criticised in many aspects. The curriculum or content of courses in colleges of education is barren and does not address the challenges facing K–12 schools (Altan, 1998). Colleges of education are short of qualified educators who have expertise in pedagogical knowledge and this might have a negative effect on the quality of education that students experience. Education faculty give their teaching too little attention, do not model what is known about effective teaching, produce routine and often ill-conceived scholarship, and stay away from public school classrooms (Altan). One reason for this problem is the policy makers’ tendency to “focus merely on the quantity problem in teacher education” (Çakiroğlu & Çakiroğlu, 2003, p. 256). The other reason is the fact that colleges of education tended to recruit graduates of colleges of letters and science rather than those of colleges of education. “Unfortunately, this tradition is still alive, though not to the same degree” (Altan).

In reference to the pedagogical expertise of teacher educators in Turkey, Altan contended,

Most faculty members in colleges of education, except for primary education, educational administration or instructional technology, were not producing research or writing about education. What was important for them was the subject. And most failed to relate theory to practice and were overspecialised. They were not effective teachers. This situation still prevails, though not on the same scale, in all colleges of education (p. 409).

Another problem facing teacher education programs in Turkey is the Westernised curricula that school teachers find irrelevant to secondary schools (Çakıroğlu & Çakıroğlu, 2003). One reason for this is educational researchers' failure interpret studies done within the context of European or American schools. They do not consider the differences between Turkey's and other countries' cultures, which in turn results in the construction of irrelevant curriculum frameworks (Çakıroğlu & Çakıroğlu).

Today the majority of the textbooks and readings used in most of the courses in teacher education programmes still originate from authors who are from other countries, mostly the UK or the USA, either as a translation or as an original text if the instruction is in English. Many other textbooks used in teacher education courses depend heavily on the international literature. Even in some courses which should be country-, culture- and situation-dependent, such as curriculum development or social foundations of education, instructors use a Western-originated knowledge base, which discusses curriculum development processes in another country. However, the same courses do not give similar attention to the important intellectual movements in the field of education in Turkey (p. 260).

The curriculum in most departments also lacks sufficient elective courses. Freedom of choice, an important ingredient of democratic education, is strictly restricted. "In the present curriculum, most courses are compulsory. There are a few electives" (Gürşimşek et al., 1997).

Teacher preparation programs also are rarely evaluated in terms of the teaching effectiveness of their graduates (Altan, 1998). The practical training period for student teaching is inefficient (Gürşimşek et al., 1997). The practicum is one of the most neglected areas in teacher training. "Far too often, trainee teacher placements are almost totally divorced from the remainder of the curriculum and supervision consists in a few site visits" (Altan, p. 410).

Last but not least, the lecture remains as the predominant instructional practice at most colleges of education. The majority of faculty still rely on lectures as their chief instructional method. Learner-centred instructional practices such as cooperative and inquiry-based learning remain on the margin of the faculty's repertoire of teaching methods. As a result, students rarely experience the kinds of learning opportunities that model for them how to employ learner-centred instructional practices. Since modelling has a great impact on people's disposition to behave in a certain manner, students who are modelled teacher-centred approaches to instruction are likely to eventually teach in the way that they are taught (Lortie, 1975).

For the above reasons, developing a new model for teacher education programs is considered one of the most important problems in Turkey (Gürşimşek et al., 1997).

Challenges facing in-service teachers

Dewey saw teachers as the key to accomplish educational ends and uplift the quality of education in Turkey. Learner-centred instruction poses a great challenge to Turkish teachers in secondary schools in several respects. First of all, the paradigm shift from “top-down” to “bottom up” teaching models inevitably involves a change in one’s approach to teaching and learning. Sustainable changes are likely to occur when teachers change the way they think about their practice (Starnes & Carone, 2002). Therefore, paradigm change in instruction demands a willingness and commitment, on the part of teachers, to re-examine their assumptions about how teaching and learning should occur. Teachers need to examine their deeply ingrained beliefs about how to approach the design of instruction. But, the teacher-centred, textbook-driven, and content-focused approach to teaching still dominates classroom instruction in secondary schools in Turkey. Since Turkish teachers are so used to employing such traditional methods as lecture, recitation and drills, they will most probably find it difficult to change their approach to teaching. Pointing out the enormity of the problem, Altan (1998) argues that there is an urgent need to rethink the traditional structure and organisation of classroom teaching in order to create more diversified learning situations. He says, “New pedagogical structures need to be devised to release teaching from its centuries-old classroom organisation and practice. But Turkey is far from such a reform.”

The roles of the teacher and students and the relationship between them need to be viewed from a quite different perspective to practice learner-centred instruction with integrity. Placing students in the centre of instruction as active constructors of knowledge and understanding, this paradigm of instruction expects the teacher to act as a co-learner, a guide and a facilitator who focuses on student learning rather than content delivery. However, this understanding of the teacher’s role as a co-learner and facilitator is too alien for Turkish teachers at all grade levels to embrace. Turkish teachers’ view themselves as the main agent of teaching and the primary transmitter of knowledge in the classroom (Gürşimşek et al., 1997). To practice learner-centred instruction, the teacher needs to provide opportunities for shared decision making, student participation, and free flows of divergent ideas and perspectives (VanSickle, 1983). But, the majority of Turkish teachers hardly provide students with choice, shared responsibility, collective decision making, and ongoing discussions of current controversial and societal issues. The suggested roles for teachers and students also imply a change in the “power relation” between the teacher and students. It is not easy for many Turkish teachers who are used to teaching in an authoritative way to welcome the change in power structure by accepting to transfer authority and responsibility to students.

The responses of the Turkish educators support the above judgments. For instance, Mr Tutar said, “I assume that the most formidable impediment before learner-centred instruction will be teachers’ resistance to such an approach.” Ms Bulut’s answer explains one of the reasons for teachers’ prospective resistance to learner-centred instruction: “Teachers have tended to perpetuate the system they were taught in, using traditional instructional methods.” Making a connection between the structure of Turkish society and teachers’ approaches to instruction, Ms Bulut further commented, “Because of Turkish society’s patriarchal structure, which is based on parental and teacher authority, students are not encouraged to participate in discussion in the class and in conversation at home.” Like Ms Bulut, Mr Aydin also pointed out the influence of the Turkish culture on instruction and learning by saying, “The most fundamental problem [facing learner-centred instruction in Turkey] is the present classical teacher-centred, oppressive, and authoritarian

education. Students experience authoritarian attitudes on parents' and teachers' part." Mr Erk also made similar comment. He said, "The biggest obstacle [facing learner-centred instruction in Turkey] is traditional, teacher-centred conception of teaching and learning. And this traditional approach to teaching cannot be changed at once. Rather, it takes quite a long time." Making a connection between pecuniary incentives and motivation, and implicitly criticising the lack of an educational system which rewards proficient and hard-working teachers than the ones who are not, Mr Ay said,

The most important problem is teachers' unwillingness to practice such methods. Preparing learner-centred instruction takes more time and effort, and I do not think that teachers are going to find it meaningful to practice such methods in this country where every teacher earns almost the same salary.

Emphasising the importance of teachers' beliefs and attitudes in carrying out educational reforms, Ms Aslan said, "Teachers should believe in the educational value of learner-centred instruction that requires students to be active in their learning before they want to see a schooling process that puts students at the centre of teaching and learning." Mr Yildiz also drew attention to the role of teachers' conceptions and dispositions in influencing teaching approaches. He said,

From my perspective, why most teachers do not practice learner-centred instruction in the elementary and secondary schools of Turkey stems from teachers' disposition and mentality. Teachers first of all need to embrace and internalize the construct of learner-centredness and then put the theoretical principles of learner-centred instruction into practice both inside and outside of classrooms. But, the majority of teachers in Turkey do not have such a disposition and practice.

Therefore, Turkish educators saw teachers' conceptions and dispositions that they thought are affected by Turkish culture as impediments before learner-centred instruction in Turkey. According to their responses, another problem facing learner-centred instruction is that most Turkish teachers lack a satisfactory understanding of learner-centred instruction and competency to practice it. For example, Mr Kurucay said, "I think the most important problem has to do with whether teachers really understand how to put learner-centred instruction into practice." Mr Ay gave a similar answer. He said, "Most teachers [in Turkey] are neither ready nor know how to make use of learner-centred instruction." Likewise, Mr Akyuz said, "Many teachers are not cognisant of the construct of learner-centredness" Emphasising the centrality of teacher training and motivation to the effective implementation of learner-centred instruction in Turkey, Ms Hisar stated,

The most important factor that I think might impede the successful implementation of students-centred learning is the lack of sufficient knowledge on what constitutes student-centred learning and teaching. If our teachers had sufficient knowledge and motivation to carry out student centred instruction they could deal with all other factors that impede its implementation.

According to Mr Yildiz, a healthy implementation of learner-centred instruction depends in large part on teacher efficacy, teachers' readiness and teachers' preparation in learner-centred instruction. But, the majority of teachers in Turkey do not have training in it, so "Teachers are quite likely to experience difficulty in adjusting themselves to the learner-centred instruction. This is especially the case

for those who are not graduates of colleges of education and thus lack sufficient training in pedagogy.” Likewise, Mr Celik stated, “The basic problem is the fact that many teachers are not competent enough to effectively practice learner-centred instruction.”

As educators’ responses clearly pointed out, learner-centred instruction demands sufficient training in pedagogy. Unfortunately, a good number of the graduates of colleges of science and literature serve as teachers in schools even though they lack sufficient pedagogical training. What is more, the Ministry of National Education employed 12,000 graduates of any of the four-year degree programs, regardless of their academic training, at elementary schools because of a shortage of teachers (Altan; 1998; Çakıroğlu & Çakıroğlu, 2003). Because these graduates’ academic background and preparation is irrelevant to teaching, they are far away from understanding the philosophical and theoretical framework of learner-centred instruction (Altan).

Problems that students may encounter

As opposed to teacher-centred instruction that emphasises content knowledge as an end itself and memorisation as a technique to keep information in mind, learner-centred paradigm of instruction stresses the use of higher-order thinking skills, critical thinking skills or a questioning attitude on students’ part (Kyle & Jenks, 2002; Rallis, 1995). But, students in Turkey occasionally engage in learning activities that call for higher-order and critical thinking skills. Their approach to learning is characterised by rote learning or memorisation as Şımşek (2004) pointed out,

The Turkish education system is heavily based on memorization and indoctrination of the official ideology.... In the last few years, courses such as human rights and democracy have become fashionable. However, they are also based on memorization. Pupils are required to memorize certain articles of the UN Declaration of Human Rights or what certain philosophers said about human rights or democracy.

Because students are used to learning via memorisation, they can be challenged by learner-centred instruction that demands higher-order skills.

The new paradigm shifts the responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student, encouraging self-directed learning. Many students may not be able to handle this responsibility even if the teacher employs scaffolding to make students more responsible for their learning (Felder & Brent, 1996; Verenikina, 2003). The stages that students experience when taking responsibility for their own learning are similar to those associated with trauma grieving. These are shock, denial, strong emotion, resistance and withdrawal, surrender and acceptance, struggle and exploration, return of confidence, and integration and success (Woods, 1994, in Felder & Brent). Teachers need be aware of these stages to effectively deal with them.

According to Turkish educators’ responses, students may (a) not be ready or willing to be at the centre of instruction; (b) find it hard to be active learners; (c) want to see passive teaching methods either to do less work or to prepare for high-stakes tests; and (d) exploit the freedom provided by learner-centred instruction. Bringing student history to attention, Mr Pinar stated, “Since students do not experience learner-centred instruction in early grades in elementary schools, most of them will not be willing to be at the centre of instruction. Therefore, it may be

difficult to involve students in such instructional methods.” Pointing out the difficulty of making a change in student roles and study habits, Mr Yildiz said, “Students are used to being passive in their learning, so they may experience uneasiness when attempting to be active learners.” Mr Erk emphasised a similar point. He said,

In teacher-centred classrooms, the teacher teaches and students just listen to him or her without doing any activities. Since this approach to teaching is more favourable for student laziness, students may find teacher-centred instruction more attractive than learner-centred instruction.

Mr Gunes’s response implied that not only lazy students but also hard-working students may opt for teacher-centred instruction because it helps them prepare for norm-referenced tests. Drawing attention to the implications of high-stakes tests for students’ future, Mr Gunes said,

Since success on standardized tests is the most important factor in determining the future career of students in Turkey (i.e., selection and placement of students in prestigious high schools such as Fen Lisesi and Anadolu Lisesi and universities via high-stakes tests), students may not find it meaningful or at least practical to experience learner-centred instruction that is less effective than teacher centred instruction in terms of preparing students for those tests.

Ms Aydin and Mr Kurt emphasised a different problem. According to their responses, students are likely to take advantage of the democratic learning environment provided by learner-centred instruction. Ms Aydin said,

Students have been exposed to teacher-centred instruction for years, so they have a little or no experience in such basic activities of learner-centred approach as learning by doing, discovering, investigating, questioning etc. Given this circumstance, students may go rampant in a learner-centred environment in which freedom is embedded.

That is why she further stated, “If teacher do not control students through structured lessons, their classes may become chaos-centred rather than learner-centred.” Drawing on his experiences in practicing learner-centred instruction, Mr Urt made similar comments:

Many students are not ready to learn via student-centred instruction. When instruction is structured around the principles of learner-centredness, students tend to exploit the democratic learning environment as was the case in my classroom. My students went so far as to defy, confront, and disobey me when I employed learner-centred instruction. They also complained me and other educators to the administrators. After this unpleasant experience, I have come to believe that you can’t completely trust students... You can’t put students at the centre of the teaching and learning process.

Conclusion and recommendations

For a country that has experienced three military coups in successive decades, it is essential for Turkish people to come to know how to live together in a pluralistic democratic society. The conception of democracy as a way of associated living within and outside of school need to inform and shape all educational experiences of students, teachers and administrators if democratic ideals, principles and values are to be attained and practiced in Turkish society. One of the reasons why democratic values, principles and ideals have not been understood and practiced adequately in Turkey has to do with the fact that students hardly engage in learning experiences characterised by democratic education (Şımşek, 2004). Since learner-centred instruction is the most suitable model of teaching to realise democratic education, there is a need to make a shift in the models of teaching from “top-down” teacher-centred instruction to “bottom up” learner-centred instruction.

To be successful, learner-centred instruction should be an acknowledged part of the institution’s mission and actively supported by all members of the school and surrounding community. To that end, the buoracratc structure of the Turkish education system needs to be de-centralised and changed in its entirety to be compatible with learner-centred instruction; the Ministry of National Education should provide more financial support for restructuring schools; the class size of schools should not be more than 30 students; new textbooks and other curriculum materials compatible with learner-centred instruction should be developed; the curricula of teacher education programs should be more relevant to the culture of Turkish society; educators need to focus their attention on how to design a coherent, pedagogically meaningful, and culturally sensitive curriculum; school teachers need to be assisted, through workshops and other means of in-service training, to make a change in their teacher-centred conception of teaching and instructional practices; teachers’ efforts to practice learner-centred instruction should be recognised and rewarded; students should be trained in such learner-centred activities as doing research, preparing investigation report, giving presentations, engaging in discussions etc.; students need to be taught how to take responsibility for their own learning via scaffolding.

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