

I. Introduction

While there has been a continuing education reform wave across the globe, mainly in the developing nations which are in search of better systems that can take them to the pathway of economic prosperity, there has been a serious lack of emphasis on the role of teachers. ‘Teacher-proof’ innovations, which assume almost full absence of teachers in the design and implementation processes of educational reform, do not make much sense and will fail (Villegas-Reimers & Reimers, 1996).

This paper aims to provide a number of policy recommendations in order to give a further understanding of increasing teacher effectiveness in Turkish education system. It is addressed to the senior policy makers at the Ministry of National Education, which oversees a gigantic system comprising approximately 17 million students excluding tertiary level and more than 600,000 teachers in 2005.

II. What is the view of research literature?

According to Villegas-Reimers and Reimers (1996), there has been either a tendency of excluding teachers or underemphasizing their roles in the majority of recent educational developments or not considering them at all as a central figure in the proposals for change. The authors strikingly exemplify the World Bank Education Sector Review of 1995, which suggests six key options to bring a new stance at education systems without a clear attribution to teachers -their selection, training, supervision or participation- in these reforms. Education policy makers put a lot of time and effort and spent considerable monetary amounts to reshape the systems, such as by concentrating on libraries, instructional time, homework, textbooks, and curriculum- which seemed to be significant predictors in at least 75% of the studies on student achievement

as opposed to teacher knowledge and teacher experience, which are significant predictors merely in half of the cases. There are a couple of shortcomings of such research; however, they are out of the scope of this paper which tries to avoid excessive details. Nonetheless, it seems very understandable to suggest that the current or future reform initiatives do not have a luxury of keeping the teachers out, who are the main implementors of daily educational efforts.

III. Turkish case: Key issues and policy recommendations

1. My first policy recommendation for Turkish case is that policy makers, mainly at the ministry, need to ask the input of teachers and make them a part of policy design and implementation process, which is something that Turkish educators almost never experienced during the last half of the century. Elley (1992, cited in Villegas-Reimers & Reimers, 1996) exemplifies the case of Venezuela when the 1980 educational reform of extending basic education from six to nine years failed when the policy makers essentially ignored teacher training. To make an analogy, the current Turkish system is based on a philosophy of “first implementing policy, then training people.” The unfortunate truth is that necessary steps are only taken during implementation process, rather than before.

The weak role of teachers at policy design and implementation level is one of the major challenges Turkish education system faces today. Teachers have been almost completely out of the policy-making process. Nonetheless, following the policy decisions which are not shaped with the input of the teachers by any means, teachers get under a remarkable pressure at the implementation level. Not only do the teachers find themselves of trying to adapt to the new policies afterwards, in most of the cases this phenomenon gets so far and unjust that the teachers become the scapegoats when policy deficiencies occur. The unfortunate part of the story is that

there have been a number of cases when some unintended negative results came onto the surface after the new policy ended up with an undeserved failure. The very basis of this problem can be seen in the neglected role of teacher.

A striking example laying out such a case can be seen at the starting, implementing and ending stages of “credit system” which was applied at secondary education level during the 1990s. The Board of Education and Discipline, a decision-making unit directly reporting to the minister and helping in almost every education-related matter, initiated this brand new policy unanimously with a claim that it would provide a brand new educational understanding at secondary level. The intentions were clearly idealistic: The students would choose from different courses as long as they comply with certain graduation requirements as opposed to the top-bottom previous system when they were required to take the courses given to them. The new bottom-up policy would serve to help students concentrate on their self-interests, find extra time for extracurricular activities, and even able to graduate from high school in less than original-three years. Still regarded even today by many teachers as one of the best thought policies ever coming from the ministry, the credit system was abolished by the same Board of Education and Discipline again unanimously only and only because it completely ignored teacher training and the role of teachers at implementation level. A probable success turned into a failure when the teacher was kept out of the particular system which was newly designed. Surprisingly, I have not met a single teacher in Turkey so far who opposed to that system, and several teachers I talked regarding this case repeatedly underlined the very fact that they also believed in the benefits of the new policy while they had no idea of what was required from them and they received no training at all prior and during the new era.

The similar situation has now been repeated again, when the Ministry of National Education decided to fully renew the curricula of primary education last year. Indeed, a similar step has been taken for secondary level as well, with an exception of implementing the new structure only for the freshmen class in the first year; year after year it will include sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The first missing part of the current policy was that the new programs were prepared without any contribution from the teachers, and only a selected group of academicians provided their input into these programs. Second, now that the curriculum for each grade at primary education has been changed starting the beginning of current academic year, there has been an inevitable need for tens of thousands of primary school teachers to be given in-service training. While the ministry spent some efforts to provide such training for a number of teachers last year it was certainly away from the total need, and yet a great percentage of educators have been spending enormous energy to follow the new curriculum which is based on active learning of the students following decades of classical teacher-based instructional system and memorization-style learning. The real challenge for those educators not having received additional training since their college graduation is that they do not have any knowledge of how to provide an active learning environment for their students; thus, it would be so naive to claim that newly developed curricula have been implemented at satisfactory level among Turkish primary schools.

The study of Villegas-Reimers and Reimers (1996) reveals that with the changing new technology, the role of the teachers have changed and now teachers need to help their students learn how to learn. For such cases like in Turkey where it is aimed to provide an active learning atmosphere for the students, the authors argue that the teachers have to be creative and develop

new information, and new teacher preparation programs should serve to make teachers effective promoters of learning.

2. The second policy recommendation is the need of a strong teacher training program at all education levels, for all educators regardless of their experiences in the profession. Turkish educators, after coming out of Teacher Schools (up until 1970s) or Education Faculties, have not been provided regular teacher training programs throughout their careers. Only a limited number of teachers have the opportunity of receiving additional training on a continuous basis and it should be mentioned that most of the teachers getting this kind of life-long education are the ones working at private schools. During one of the TV programs I participated as a speaker, I remember a senior union manager saying that he had been a teacher for the last 25 years without a single opportunity of receiving teacher training. The worse part is that as the time passes with significant improvements occurring in technological field, those who got their teachers diplomas two or three decades ago are becoming more and more classical in the profession with a tendency of teaching only on the basis of instructional style. And the worst of all is that when teachers are not provided in-service training, newly implemented policies either do not work at all or their success level remains unexpectedly low.

One fair example regarding this case can be seen after August 8, 1997, when the Ministry of National Education converged the lower schools and middle schools to form eight-year primary schools following the historical decision of Turkish parliament of increasing the duration of compulsory education from five years to eight years under the Primary Education Code of 4306. Except a very few, almost nobody opposed to the new decision, which was believed to be completely necessary especially when the educational developments regarding

compulsory school years across the globe are taken into consideration. Anyhow, the teachers were never asked to provide input as to whether such an implementation could be undertaken in a more efficient style. The curriculum, the books, the yearly plans of teachers were all given by the highly centralized ministry and the teachers were simply asked to follow the instructions. Has the compulsory education been a success so far in Turkey? By all means but foreign language teaching.

Turkey had been very successful in teaching foreign language to its youngsters starting from the 1960s up until the implementation of newly developed eight-year compulsory education system. The most successful schools in teaching foreign language (indeed, the author of this paper finds himself lucky as being a graduate of one of these schools) were the ones which offered a full-year of very intense foreign language education in the so-called “prep class.” The students had been starting to learn foreign language at the age of eleven and a great majority of Turkish people who are fluent in one of the foreign languages come from one of these schools. The Compulsory Education Act, designed and implemented without any contribution from the teachers, abolished the prep class and gave an opportunity to initiate foreign language instruction at fourth grade, two years earlier. Despite the fact that students start to learn a foreign language earlier, the effectiveness of the system totally decreased and paradoxically, teaching a foreign language to young generations has become a real challenge now. Apart from the exclusion of teachers at implementation level, this challenge stemmed from two critical issues:

- The abolishment of prep class removed the opportunity for a student of dedicating his/her full year for a foreign language.
- The teachers who previously taught a foreign language to the eleven-year-old students or elder ones were then given the assignment of teaching lower classes which required a completely

different pedagogical approach. Since these teachers had only been educated to teach eleven-year-olds or higher classes, the lack of such pedagogical training has created an enormous amount of frustration, especially for those who had been highly successful in their professions before struggling at lower classes following the new enactment. In fact, when I asked my faculty members as to why some of our students in lower school had been struggling with their English classes, it was not uncommon to receive responses pointing out that dealing with this age group was a brand new experience for them and since the teachers received no further training for their new assignments, they insistently made it clear that it would take time to learn how to keep those age groups' concentration during class hours. It is no surprise that educational research supports this view. According to Villegas-Reimers and Reimers (1996), in most countries, teachers who are prepared as specialists are very much specialized in their areas that they know very few about pedagogy. The scholars suggest an alternative for this dilemma which is based on preparing all teachers to teach all children.

The research of the abovementioned authors provides good evidence on the importance of engaging teachers prior to educational reforms. They assert that there is a need to “engage teachers in a dialogue about the reforms, both at the stages of design and implementation.” (p. 484) They also point out that teachers are rarely consulted in educational innovations and reforms can in fact be more productive thanks to teachers' feedback both at design and implementation stages of the process. The authors provide further evidence from Paraguay that following a series of evaluations from teachers regarding the implementation of a new basic education curriculum which was perceived dissatisfactorily by the teachers before, the curriculum was reformulated and it ended up in a major alignment of teachers towards the reform. Another research by Warwick and Reimers (1995) gives a justified example from

Pakistan where even with a weak academic background, teachers receiving training were able to learn some teaching and subject matter skills which they lacked before.

3. The third and final policy recommendation I want to indicate is the need for practical study for future teachers at education faculties. Arguably one of the most heavily debated issues at Turkish education system is the lack of practical preparedness of education faculty graduates which directly relates to “teacher effectiveness” as an overemphasis on theoretical issues does not help many teacher trainees to perform better in their first assignments. The truth is that a great majority of faculty graduates assume their initial responsibility with almost no serious training carried off their college years. While the education faculties’ curricula require prospective teachers to have student internship during their course of study, these young candidate teachers virtually do not teach and even they do, they are assigned to mentor teachers who tend to spend their full career with traditional techniques and classroom management methods.

Educational research provides similar findings regarding the lack of practicum in teacher preparation process. As Villegas-Reimers and Reimers (1996) suggest, in many developing countries teacher preparation programs offer a heavy theory-based structure while the candidates find virtually no opportunity to practice their skills before the graduation. Indeed, the researchers also indicate that co-operating teachers and the site of practice are mostly based on traditional teaching methods.

For the last seven years, I have been personally facing some wonderful candidates who come out of education faculties with technological skills, a fluency of one or more foreign languages, and awful lot of pedagogical training; nonetheless, these bright teachers mostly lack

the practical part of their training. Most of the academic administrators of these institutions are aware of this shortcoming with the belief that their graduates could perform much better. However, because of the fact that the education faculties almost have no contacts with primary and secondary schools, the situation is unable to be handled well. Villegas-Reimers and Reimers (1996) point out that teacher preparation programs mostly do not match with primary and secondary schools' expectations. They acknowledge that as the teacher training institutions are often isolated from the education systems, the teachers do not find the chance to get prepared to carry out the plans and programs of the ministries.

References:

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