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# Program reform in primary schools in turkey: what do primary school teachers think?

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to find out the thoughts of primary school teachers about the program reform made in primary school teaching in 2004-2005 academic-years. 125 teachers appointed at schools in Eskisehir city center attended to the study which is designed using relational survey method. Data were collected using a questionnaire consisting of semi-structured, open-ended questions. In the analysis of the data descriptive analysis technique was used. At the end of the study, it was found out that the primary school teachers are positive against new primary school program and interpret it as a reform.

*Keywords: Classroom Teacher, Education Reform, Primary School, Primary School Program, Survey Method, Turkey*

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## 1. Introduction

In Primary education in Turkey, important changes related to programs were made in 1926, 1930, 1932, 1936, 1948, 1962, 1968, 1989, 1993, 1998 and 2004. Especially in 1997, studies which could be accepted as reform were made in Primary schools and primary education. In this respect, eight-year primary education was made compulsory and programs were arranged accordingly. Meanwhile, in respect to program development studies, the programs of some courses were prepared separately until 2004. In 2004, however, Social Studies, Turkish, Science and Technology, Life Sciences, and Mathematics courses for 1-5 grades were prepared again in the light of constructivist approach and applied. Later, Religion and Morality, Visual Arts, Music, Physical Education, Foreign Languages and other courses were prepared in the same respect.

In historical perspective, there have been significant changes in educational policies of Turkey in parallel to socio-political transformations experienced by the last two centuries which are characterized with the transition from traditional state to modern state. In this process, the qualities of relationships with the Western world and the general characteristics of international political systems have been quite determining in regard to the formation of Turkey's modernization character (Inalcik, 1995; Akinoglu, 2008). Parallel to the tendency to make a universal reform, Turkey's Ministry of National Education prepared primary school programs in 2004 again which assume the role of preparing individuals to life along with preparing them to a higher grade education in order to accommodate to the era and to educate more qualified individuals. New primary school program which was defined as program reform by Ministry of National Education was prepared in constructivist view by taking approaches and started to be used in Primary Schools gradually starting from 2005-2006 education year.

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### 1.1. Basic Characteristics of 2004 Primary School Programs

The characteristics of primary school programs according to structural elements could be classified as follows:

*Aims:* The most important change achieved related to aims in the program is that the private aims of the course are defined as gains. The aims which were defined as behaviorist according to behaviorist approach in programs of 1998 and before has been defined as gains according to constructivist approach in 2004. “Gains” which embodies the contents of learning areas are knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that students should gain with the help of planned and arranged experiences during their learning period. Although knowledge, skills and values are accepted as separate categories in behaviorist approach, they are considered a significant whole in constructivist approach (Safran, 2004). In this respect, the aims of the new program were prepared in constructivist approach and its elements of focus could be classified as follows (MEB, 2004): using Turkish efficiently and correctly, putting emphasis on cultural values and arts, getting pleasure from reading and learning, conveying feelings and thoughts freely, supporting the participation of the family to teaching-learning process, using at least one foreign language effectively, using information technologies efficiently and effectively according to their aims, working together and communicating, being aware of the changes around and adopting to these changes, being aware that the duties and responsibilities should be determined on his/her own, willing to find opportunities in close environment and different countries, and showing effort to realize these opportunities, recognizing that some opportunities could be found if a different perspective is considered, willing to obey the rules of life and do the works, and showing determination to apply, objecting to conditioning, recognizing that toleration is the key for a flexible mind.

Common skills which are aimed to have students gain are also determined in 2004 program. These skills are using Turkish correctly and efficiently, critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, problem solving, research, decision making, using information technologies, and entrepreneurship (MEB, 2004).

*Content:* The content of the 2004 Primary School Program is more flexible than previous programs. While topics and subtopics were placed in previous programs, in 2004 program, activities that aim to realize achievements of the units that area formed according to *learning fields*. *Learning field* which is emphasized for the first time in 2004 program could be defined as “a structure where interrelated skills, themes, concepts and values are seen as a whole, and which composes learning”. Thus, learning field means a structure that should be considered in the units to be taught, and that would edit learning (MEB, 2004).

Associating the content is highly considered in 2004 primary school program. In this respect; it is expected to associate units, courses and inter-disciplines. In other words, it is expected to from relations between achievements that are anticipated in units taking part in learning fields and achievements of other units, courses and inter-disciplines. Interdisciplinary subjects take part for the first time in 2004 program. These mentioned inter-disciplines could be classified as follows (MEB, 2004): disaster education and safe life, entrepreneurship, human rights and citizenship, special training, guidance and psychological consultancy, health culture, sports culture and Olympic education,

*Teaching-Learning Process:* 2004 primary school program reflects the understanding of constructivist approach in teaching-learning process. In constructivist view, students are not passive receptors of outer stimuli but active participants for the behaviors of them. Students are responsible for their own learning and as the individual who chooses and processes the information for their own needs, they are active in learning. Thus, in educational environments suggested by constructivist view individuals should take more responsibility and should be active in learning. It is an important suggestion of the program that activities which allow students to find a rich learning experience and provides them with more interaction with their environment (Yasar, 1998). However, having big numbers of students in the classes in Turkey makes it hard to conduct studies in the classrooms (Şahin et al., 2005). Therefore, it cannot be claimed that the methods and techniques which need students be active participants could be applied in such classes (Yıldırım, 2008). In the new program a student-centered understanding has been embraced in teaching-learning process, and teachers are expected to prepare activities that allow students actively participate (MEB, 2004).

*Evaluation:* In 2004 program, not only the learning output, but also the learning process is evaluated. Evaluation is a tool that allows us to see what the students know rather than what they do not know. With this aim, there are various evaluation tools that support teaching-learning process. Teachers are expected to use the evaluation tools mentioned in the program or develop their own program that suits the needs of the achievements in the units by being inspired by evaluation tools mentioned. How the program approaches to evaluation could be explained with the principles as “not only learning output but also learning process is evaluated”, “improvement of the child is followed using suitable evaluation tools”, “evaluation system observes all the functions of the school and directs the

improvement”, “accepts that obeying discipline and rules is for the students’ benefit, thus, expects students to take the responsibility”, and “encourages both evaluation through product and process” (MEB, 2004). The primary aim of the study is to determine the opinions of primary school teachers about the program reform made in primary school curriculum in 2004-2005 academic year in Turkey. With this primary aim in mind, following questions were asked: What do classroom teachers think:

1. about constructivist approach?
2. about 2004 program?
3. about the main differences between 1998 program and 2004 program?
4. about whether they accept 2004 program as a reform or not?
5. about what should be done to make 2004 program a reform?

## 2. Methodology

The study was conducted using survey model. Qualitative research methods were applied in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The participants of the study consist of classroom teachers working in primary schools in Eskisehir city center. While choosing samples, two-stage cluster sampling method from cluster sampling methods was applied. A total of 125 teachers participated. Two-third of the teachers who participated in the study were females (65,6%), the rest (34,4%) were males. When teachers’ teaching experience is considered, teachers having 11-15 years of teaching experience were majority (26,4%). The rate of teachers having 26 years an up teaching experience was (23,2%). The data of the study were collected using a questionnaire consisting of semi-structured open-ended questions. In this respect, a questionnaire consisting of 5 questions was prepared by the researcher. In the analysis of the data descriptive analysis technique was applied (Yıldırım & Simsek, 2003). The data gathered while doing descriptive analysis were interpreted according to themes determined before. Collected data were presented with direct quotations were made from teacher opinions. To have the reliability of the study, the answers provided by the teachers to open-ended questions were closely examined by the researcher and an expert from the field to determine items having “agreement” and “disagreement”. For the reliability of the study following formula provided by Miles & Huberman (1994) was used.  $P (\text{Agreement Rate}) = [\text{Na} (\text{Agreement}) / \text{Na} (\text{Agreement}) + \text{Nd} (\text{Disagreement})] \times 100$ . As a result of this calculation  $P = 91, 58$  was found and the study was accepted reliable.

## 3. Findings

In this part of the study, data collected through a questionnaire containing semi-structured, open-ended questions, were analyzed and the results were presented and interpreted on the basis of study questions.

### 3.1. Findings related to the views of teachers concerning constructivist learning approach

Most classroom teachers accept constructivist theory as a student-centered approach. Along with this, a great many of the teachers indicated that information is not accepted directly but formed in mind by the learners. Moreover, teachers mentioned that constructivist approach supports higher level thinking skills like critical thinking, self-expression, creative thinking, etc., helps integrate subjects with real life, and aims to teach the ways to reach information to students. Furthermore, classroom teachers consider constructivist approach as an approach that pays attention to individual differences, and student needs and interests; brings new insights and alternatives to evaluation; raises school-family relations; encourages technology use, and causes a change in the concept of teacher.

While one of the teachers indicated his views about constructivist learning theory as his views about constructivist learning theory as “*constructivist learning theory provides opportunities for students to choose, process, compare and contrast, and most importantly interpret the information they gained by active participation rather than passively accepting the provided information*”, another teacher claimed “*reaching information by researching other than memorizing them, helps him to reach a level where he can create new ideas and solve problems*”.

### 3.2. Findings related to the views of teachers concerning basic approach and features of 2004 program

Most of the classroom teachers stated that new primary school program directs students to do research and critically think on subjects. Furthermore, teachers agreed that the subjects in the new primary school program are suitable for levels and degree of student development. Moreover, teachers indicated that new primary school program encourages higher level thinking skills like critical thinking, self-expression, creative thinking, etc. Also, some of the teachers emphasized that the new primary school program is student-centered. On the other hand, classroom teachers stated their negative opinions about the new school program as they experienced problems in administering the new primary school program because of the differences between economic, environmental and

family related factors; although the content of the program is lessened, it is not possible to cover it because of time constraints; since it is based on application, a need for tools is created; and some problems are faced in evaluation.

### 3.3. Findings related to the views of teachers concerning the differences between 1998 program and 2004 program

Classroom teachers are in consensus that new primary school program is far from memorization, is more student centered, supports higher level thinking skills like critical thinking, self-expression, creative thinking, etc. Moreover, subjects' and daily life's being more integrated in the new program is another common ground. Other than these, teachers think that the new program brings a new insight into evaluation, emphasizes the ways to reach at the information, and brings innovations like projects and performance tasks, and arranged in a way to meet the needs of the era. While one of the teachers, related to the differences when previous and new curricula are compared, stated his opinion as *“previous program was, a bit, based on memorization. In this new program, there is student in the center. It is based on application, and doing and experiencing”*; another teacher said *“since it is a constructivist program, it highlights the creativity of the students in the first place. Students are productive”*.

### 3.4. Findings related to the views of teachers concerning whether the teachers consider the 2004 program as a reform or not

Most of the teachers consider the new primary school program a reform in education, an important part of teachers do not consider it a reform. While one of the teachers who consider the new program a reform in education stated his opinion by saying *“I could consider it a reform if my colleagues can assimilate the philosophy lying behind the new program, could give up their previous habits and make necessary changes in their teaching methods”*, another teacher said *“when I consider the previous curricula, I accept that this program is more innovative”*. One of the teachers who does not think the new program is innovative stated *“I do not think this new program is a reform. It is only richened by activities. There is ambiguity in evaluation. If it were a reform, the teachers would be educated first”*.

### 3.5. Findings related to the views of teachers concerning what should be done to make 2004 program a reform

Most classroom teachers think that necessary tools and equipments should be supplied, and proficiency exams should be disregarded or made compatible with the new program to make the new program better in the future. Moreover, most of the teachers indicate that in-service training should be made more qualified and fast, parents should be informed about the new program, time-subject compatibility should be acquired and time allocated for some courses should be increased accordingly, teachers should be informed about evaluation, solutions should be found for the problems encountered in projects and performance tasks, and course books, workbooks and guide books should be evaluated and necessary changes should be made. One of the teachers who expressed opinions about how to make the programs better in the future said *“the exam system in use now should be abolished”*. While another teacher said *“the philosophy lying behind this new program should clearly be understood, to make it clear educational staff should be educated about the new program in terms of applying new teaching-learning techniques”*.

## Discussion

The first result of the this study which aimed to determine how classroom teachers perceive the suggestions of new primary school program that was put into effect in 2004-2005 academic year in Turkey and whether they accept it as a reform puts forward that most of the classroom teachers perceive structuralism as a student-centered theory. Moreover, most of the teachers state that structuralism is a theory where information is not directly accepted but formed in the mind of the learners by themselves, that supports higher level thinking skills like critical thinking, self-expression, creative thinking, etc., helps integrate subjects with the real life, and aims to teach ways to reach at information to students. Furthermore, classroom teachers accepts structuralism as a theory that pays attention to student interests and needs; brings new insights and alternatives to evaluation: increases school-family relations; supports technology use, and causes a change in the concept of teacher. As a matter of fact, in the study carried out by Cinar et al. (2006), similar results were revealed that primary school teachers and managers view constructivist approach as a theory that it is student-centered, would make education activities enjoyable, and accelerate social development of the students.

Second result of the study is that classroom teachers generally provided positive feedback against new primary school program. Although there are teachers that provided negative feedback, most of the classroom teachers claim that new primary school program encourages students to do research and think; subjects are compatible with student levels and students' degree of development; supports higher level thinking skills like critical thinking, self-expression, creative thinking, etc., and it is student-centered.

The third result of the study revealed that most of the classroom teachers agree that 2004 primary school program is different from 1998 program. As a matter of fact, most of the classroom teachers are in consensus that



new primary school programs are far from memorization, are more student-centered, and are programs that support higher level thinking skills like creative thinking, self-expression, and creative thinking. Moreover, they agree that the subjects in the program and real life are more compatible; the program brings new insights into evaluation, focuses on the ways to reach information, brings innovations like projects and performance tasks, and is arranged according to the needs of the era.

Related to the third finding of this study, there are some teachers who gave negative feedback, as well. According to this, classroom teachers stated that because of the differences in economical situations, environment, and family factors, some problems related to the new program has been experienced; although the content of the programs were lessened. It is still very difficult to cover all the activities because of time constraints; because it is based on application, material is needed; and there are problems in evaluation. As a matter of fact, Korkmaz (2006) found that having crowded classrooms, families' lack of knowledge about the new program, teachers' having too much paperwork during evaluation period are the reasons that prevent the program to reach its aims. Similarly, Cinar (2006) claimed that the new program would bring too much work for the teachers, and the substructure and opportunities are insufficient to fulfill the aims of the new program. In this respect, the anxiety that material to be used could not be provided, insufficient desks and chairs for students to sit, crowded classes, not having enough hardware at school are grasping the attention and they are other subjects that could create problems in the implementation of the new program. The finding of this study revealed that there are problems in evaluation is compatible with the finding of "the area that teachers perceive that they are insufficient is evaluation" provided by Gozutok et al. (2005). On the other hand, Bağdatlı (2005) reached a conclusion that the time suggested to apply methods and techniques in the program is insufficient, and there is information over the levels of the students. One of the most important findings of the study is that the new primary school programs are considered a reform by most of the teachers. However, some of the primary school teachers do not consider new programs as a reform. Teachers who do not consider new programs a reform stated various reasons. As a matter of fact, Bulut (2007) in their study concluded that teachers consider the new program a reform compared with previous ones. But, most of the teachers believe that in order to make new primary school programs better in the future, the insufficiency of hardware, tools and materials should be covered, and proficiency exams should be abolished or be made compatible with the new program. As a matter of fact, the results gained in other studies held in Turkey also support the data gained in this study. As a result, about the new program which was prepared in year 2004 taking constructivist approach as basis, and put in effect in 2004-2005 academic year, and considered a reform by Ministry of National Education, it could be said that teachers have positive opinions, and they consider the new program a reform. However, things to be done for the program to be better in the future and to be established as a reform are also appear. In this respect, necessary tools and equipment should be covered, placement tests should be abolished or made compatible with the new program, in-service training should be made more qualified and fast, parents should be informed about the new program appears to be the things to be done.

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