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Teacher and Administrator Perceptions of Religion and Ethics Education Practices in the Primary Schools of TRNC

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Abstract

An Education of religion and ethics has been a long-standing element of the school curriculum in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, delivered as a compulsory subject to primary grades 4 and 5 as well as in secondary schools. Numerous issues concerning this practice have been raised by both the national media and the teacher's unions. In the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, research studies conducted on religious education are scarce. The existing studies have largely focused on various teaching methodologies for religious education, desired teacher qualities and qualifications and so on. A review of the relevant literature suggested that no research study has so far been conducted specifically on the teachers' and administrators' perceptions of how to deliver the religious education lessons in schools. Taking account of teacher and administrator perceptions, this study aims to investigate the processes of teaching the religion and ethics lessons effectively in the primary schools of TRNC. To that end, a questionnaire was developed following deliberations and evaluations with specialists in the field. The questionnaire was composed of two sections. While the first section collected demographic information about the participant teachers and administrators, the latter posed four open-ended questions about the religion and ethics lesson. The questionnaire was distributed to the teachers and administrators involved with the teaching of the concerned lessons at the primary level in the city of Güzelyurt, TRNC. Ten teachers and ten administrators returned the filled questionnaire. Five of the teacher participants taught grade 4 and the other five taught grade 5. While five of the administrators were employed at the time of the study, the other five had been retired. The questionnaire data revealed that the religion and ethics lessons were not implemented efficiently in the primary schools of TRNC and that the lessons were offered by the schools even though the teachers assigned to deliver them were nonspecialists. However, it was also found that, owing to the exam anxiety surrounding college entrance, demanding curricular content and nonspecialist teacher profiles, overall little or no classroom practice existed regarding the education of religion and ethics.

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1. Introduction

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) which is only officially recognised by the Republic of Turkey in the international arena, follows the example of Turkey in every field including the field of education. This includes religious education, which is taught in primary and middle schools in the TRNC.

Cyprus was conquered by the Ottoman State in 1571. During the Ottoman period, the requirements of social life were met through charitable foundations. Aside from the madrasahs (Muslim theological schools) and ottoman primary schools, institutions that contribute to education such as Islamic monasteries, mosques, the libraries, etc., were established. When the island was leased to the British in 1878, Turks fell in a weaker position in the island (The fact that the institution of religion was not on the island weakened the religious institutions). At that time, various Qur'an schools and mosque classes, which were free education institutions, continued their activities. In 1915, until the unilateral invasion of Cyprus by the British, Turkish schools adhered to the Ottoman schools' curriculum, school programs and school books were brought from Turkey. With the Lausanne Treaty signed in 1923, the British officially incorporated Cyprus to its lands. The most far-reaching impacts of this outcome for the Turkish society were the removal of the office of the mufti from the Island and the conversion of the pious foundation into a government office. The Turkish Cypriots, who were defined as the Muslim community by the British Administration, became religiously uncertain when the office of the mufti was abolished. At the same time, due to the fact that the mosques were no longer able to serve their purpose, these religious places became neglected and imams (Muslim religious leaders) could not be trained.

As a result of struggles, the office of the mufti was re-established in 1953. In the period of the Republic of Cyprus, except for primary schools and the teachers' college, religious lessons were not taught in Turkish middle schools and high schools. For the first time in 1973, at the request of the Cyprus office of mufti, four religious officials from Turkey served in Cyprus, in Ramadan. Thus, began the process of employing religious officials in Cyprus who were connected to the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs to carry out mosque duties. In 1974 the island was divided into two: North Cyprus (Turkish side) and South Cyprus (Greek side).

After this date, the Turks started to rebuild charitable foundations and the office of the mufti. The most important difficulty of the Religious Affairs Office that exists in the Island is the fact that they do not have enough staff to perform religious services. The void that has been created due to long years of neglect has not been filled, and the Turkish Cypriots have not been able to raise a personal cadre of religious officers within their population who would be sufficient for them.

After 1974, in 1976, the Turkish Cypriot Ministry of Education decided that in parallel with the religious education in secondary schools within the secondary education program in Turkey, religion lessons be taught as an elective subject. However, due to the reasons such as not being able to find suitably qualified teachers for the subject and the subject being put in hours that were not suitable, the expected yield was not obtained (Atalay, 2005).

In the Constitution of the Turkish Cypriot Federated State (TCFS), which was established following the Happy Peace Operation in 1975, it was stated that "Religious education and training is under the supervision of the state. It is dependent on the request of the legal representatives of the minor." Through this, religious lessons for the Turkish Cypriots were adopted and put into practice as elective courses (Turkish Cypriot Federal State Constitution, 1975).

However, despite the clear provision in the Constitution of the TCFS, unfortunately, religious education was not implemented sufficiently effectively and efficiently due to many reasons.

In 1982, in mother country Turkey, religion classes were reconfigured as Religious Culture and Morality, and incorporated within the scope of compulsory subjects taught in schools and this decision was put into practice. Despite the fact that there have been various arguments over many years in Turkey as to whether the Religious Culture and Morality classes should be compulsory or optional, they are still taught as compulsory subjects (Yıldız, 2009). In parallel with Turkey, in Northern Cyprus, Religious Culture and Morality class was incorporated into compulsory subjects and was put into practice within primary and middle schools in the TRNC. Since 1982 the Religious Culture and Morality course books which were used for this class in mother country Turkey's schools began to be used by the Cyprus Turks.

Nevertheless, since TRNC does not have the existing conditions and the teaching staff in Turkey it has not been possible for religion to be taught in schools in an effective and healthy manner.

Religious Culture and Morality Course are organized through the 23rd article of the TRNC Constitution which states that "Religious training and education is carried out under the supervision and control of the state" and this course is required as a compulsory course in elementary and middle schools attached to the Ministry of National Education and Culture. (TRNC Constitution, 1983). Religious Culture and Morality Course are taught according to the TRNC National Education Law, "Secularism is essential in National Education (National Education Law, 1986), religious education can be done in educational institutions provided that it does not contradict this principle". This course is still compulsory and given for one hour a week in the 4th and 5th grades of primary schools and 6th, 7th and 8th grades of middle schools in the TRNC.

However, there are many problems in the implementation of the religious education which is required by the Constitution and the law because of many reasons, especially the lack of subject teachers in the field of religion in the TRNC.

Although it is legally obligatory in the TRNC, in practice, the necessary importance is not given to religious education and the Religious Culture and Morality Course is treated as an unnecessary course.

1.1. The Teaching Staff of Religious Culture and Morality Course

The Ministry of National Education and Culture of the TRNC has no permanent teachers who provide religious education in primary and middle education. Religion classes in primary schools in TRNC are given for one hour a week in the 4th and 5th grades and are taught by the class teacher.

In middle schools, this course is taught by contracted people appointed by the Republic of Turkey. These people are usually the graduates of the Faculty of Theology or another four-year undergraduate program. These teachers, who give religious education, work in the TRNC for one year at the beginning of each academic year under contract.

TRNC religious education curriculum is the same as the religious education curriculum implemented in Turkey, the teaching materials used in Turkey are also exactly the same for this course in Northern Cyprus

1.2. The Problems in the Implementation of Religious Culture and Morality Course

There have been some problems expressed by teacher circles and parents about the application of the Religious Culture and Morality course in the TRNC. The most important of these problems are summarized below:

- Attitudes from the Past Related to Religion,
- The Absence of Branch Teachers for the Religion Culture and Morality Course,
- Training and Competence Problems of the Teachers Giving the Religion Course,
- Problems Caused by Students,
- Problems Related to Curriculum and Course Times

2. Method

The research is a qualitative study using the stratified random sampling method. This method of sampling is used when there is diversity within the general population among the units and involves grouping these units of similar characteristics in terms of the traits that are being investigated into subgroups called "**strata**". The sampling is

performed by combining samples selected from each stratum using the simple random sampling method (sampling, ppt).

This section of the study includes samples of the study, data collection tool, and the analysis and interpretation of the data.

2.1. Working group

This Research Working Group, which was established with the aim of determining the opinions of teachers and administrators regarding the effective teaching of the Religious Culture and Morality Course in TRNC Primary Schools, constitutes of teachers who are still teaching or have thought the religion course in the primary schools operating in the Güzelyurt District.

A total of 20 people including 10 teachers and 10 administrators were included in the study. The sample was selected according to stratified grouping method, 5 participants were retired administrators, 5 participants were administrators, 5 participants were 5th-grade teachers and 5 participants were 4th-grade teachers.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

For the collection of the data, an interview form questionnaire was developed as a result of the interviews and evaluations made with experts in this field. The questionnaire consists of two main sections. The first section comprises of the demographic information of teachers and administrators and the second section of four open-ended questions related to the Religion Culture and Morality lesson (Appendix 1). A pilot study was conducted with 5 people for the created questionnaire form. As a result of the pilot study, the survey was given its final form.

The survey was conducted between 20th of April and 20th of May 2016 by face to face interview. The minimum duration of the interview was 10 minutes and the maximum duration was 30 minutes. The answers given by each interviewee were sent back to them for checking. 15 people returned the questionnaire without making any changes and 5 people made minor corrections and updated the answers they gave.

Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the teachers and administrators participating in the study in terms of gender, age, professional seniority and working status.

Table 1. The Demographic Characteristics of Teachers and Administrators

Variable		N	%
Gender	Female	9	45
	Male	11	55
Age	Between 20-30	3	15

	Between 31-40	2	10
	Between 41-50	8	40
	51 and above	7	35
Professional Seniority	Between 1-5 years	1	5
	Between 6-10 years	2	10
	Between 11-20 years	5	25
	21 years and above	12	60
Employment Status	Working-teacher	10	50
	Working-administrator	5	25
	Retired-teacher	-	-
	Retired-administrator	5	25

According to Table 1, 11 (55%) of the participants were male and 9 (45%) were female. Teachers who were between the ages of 20 and 30; were 3 (15%), between the ages of 31 and 40 were 2 (10%), between the ages of 41 and 50 were 8 (40%) and 51 and above were 8 (35%). Were 8. In terms of professional seniority, there was 1 (5%) participant with experience between 1-5 years, 2 (10%) for 6-10 years, 5 (25%) for 11-20 years and 12 (60%) for over 21 years. In terms of working status, 10 participants (50%) are teachers, 5 managers (25%) and 5 (25%) are retired managers.

The results obtained from the responses given to the open-ended questions asked in the second section of the questionnaire to the teachers and administrators participating in the study can be summarized as follows:

Question 1: *“Are you teaching the Religious Culture and Morality lessons sufficiently effectively and efficiently?”*

The vast majority of the teachers (16 people) participating in the study stated that they did not teach the "Religious Culture and " lessons sufficiently effectively and efficiently, and 4 people stated that they taught the course efficiently in the first years of their profession. K16 stated that "Religion is the most important element in unifying society. But it's a disregarded lesson. In the years when I first started working in the profession, I showed everything from visits to the mosque to the ritual prayers of Islam.

After the secondary school entrance exam system was implemented, I taught the 5 important surahs (sections of the Koran) and the life of the prophet. K2 stated that "I do not believe that it is a lesson that is necessary to be given in primary school. It is very difficult for children to learn the surahs. It is suitable that only Morality is taught" The most important and most significant of the answers given to this question is that almost half of the teachers said that they did not teach this lesson effectively in the years when the TRNC college exams were being held and that at other times they taught it effectively.

Question 2: *"If you are not teaching this lesson effectively why? List your reasons in order of importance."*

The reasons for the teachers and administrators who participated in the survey and answered negatively to Question 1 are given below in terms of importance.

- TRNC Secondary School Entrance Exams
- The intensity of the curriculum
- There were students from different religions in the classroom
- Not believing in the necessity of religious education
- Seeing themselves as not competent in this subject

K3, "In the fourth grade, the priority is on mathematics, science and social studies. We need to prepare for the secondary school entrance exams as necessitated by the system", K1, K2, K4, K6, K7, K8, K11, K13 (6 teachers and 2 administrators from the participants) state that "I never teach this course due to the college exams I cannot find the time to teach this course", While K5 and K10 (two teachers from the participants) say that "We have non-Muslim children in the class".

Question 3: *"How competent do you see yourself for the Religious Culture and Morality course?"*

11 of the teachers and administrators participating in the study considered themselves competent for this course, 4 saw themselves as less competent and 5 saw themselves as not competent. While K14 states "I see myself as quite competent" K1, K2,

K4, K5, K6, K7, K15 (6 teachers and 1 manager from the participants) see themselves as "competent for only elementary school". K5 states "I don't see myself as competent"

Question 4: *"Do you think that the Religious Culture and Morality course should be given by a graduate of this area? Why?"*

15 of the teachers and administrators participating in the study stated that primary school teachers who did not graduate from the field but who graduated from Atatürk Teacher Academy could give these lessons. Teachers and administrators who share this point of view consider it harmful for these lessons to be given to students in an excessively intense and overwhelming manner by those who are graduates of this field.

They stated their belief that students of elementary school age could be prematurely influenced and adversely affected. 5 teachers and administrators responded to this question by stating that the Religious Culture and Morality course should be taught by those who graduated from the field and have pedagogical formation. Teachers and administrators who support the teaching of religion by field graduates have emphasized that the course would be more useful too if given by experts without going deeply into religious matters and that just as in any other field it is important and necessary for experts in the field to provide training in the field.

K12 stated that "Subjects should be taught superficially at the level of elementary school." K8 stated that "It is necessary for the field graduate who is going to give this course to have complete pedagogical knowledge and to have pedagogical training." K1 stated that "If students are exempt from secondary school entrance exams and the curriculum is reduced, primary school teachers can teach the Religious Culture and Morality course quite comfortably".

3. Discussion and conclusion

Religion and Morality course is taught as a compulsory course both in primary and middle schools in the TRNC. Individuals belonging to other religions in the TRNC have no arrangements or schools for religious education. There are few studies in the literature on the teaching of religion and morality in schools in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

With the opening of the Hala Sultan Theology College in the TRNC in recent years, the issue of religious education in the TRNC has become a centre of attention both in the public and in the media circles. It is especially the fact that religious education is predominantly carried out by an official state school in a college is seriously criticized by certain circles.

On the other hand, there is also a significant segment that argues such a college is needed and that students who want to receive this education should also be provided for especially considering the TRNC population structure. There are articles on these issues which are sometimes published in the media which are disturbing to public opinion. In addition to this, the practices of the Ministry of National Education and Culture concerning religious education are criticized especially by certain teacher unions. Most of these criticisms are not based on scientific grounds but are based on political or ideological foundations.

This study was conducted in order to find out whether the course of Religious Culture and Morality in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is taught effectively in primary schools. The results of the study, conducted through participants chosen by the stratified sampling method, using a qualitative questionnaire with 20 actively working or retired teachers and administrators, who gave lessons of religion in elementary schools in Güzelyurt District. Indicate that Religious Education and Morality class is not taught in an effective and productive manner in TRNC primary schools due to the fact that the teachers who teach this course are not experts in this field.

There is an overconcern about the secondary school entrance examination and the curriculum is already too heavy, all of which result in the Religious Culture and Morality course being taught little or none at all in practice. At the same time, it was stated that it would be appropriate for the Religious Culture and Morality lesson to be given by teachers who had graduated from Atatürk Teacher College or by teachers who have education on religion with a pedagogical formation.

At the end of the study, it emerged that teachers and administrators have different views on the effective and productive teaching of the Religious Culture and Morality in TRNC primary schools.

Findings obtained from this study point that the things that are first and foremost necessary for the Religious Culture and Morality lesson to be taught efficiently and productively in TRNC. Elementary schools are firstly the Ministry of National Education and Culture authorities, with the participation of relevant stakeholders, prepare a religious education curriculum specific to the TRNC with the contribution of experts from the field, the creation of a permanent teaching staff for the field, and informing the society in a way in which religious education can be acceptable to it.

This study is limited only to the Güzelyurt district in the TRNC. Therefore, if similar studies are conducted in all provinces of the TRNC and actions are taken in accordance with the general results, more healthy results could be obtained. Moreover, it is clear that the inclusion of parental opinions in these studies would be very useful for the effective and productive teaching of the Religious Culture and Morality course in TRNC primary schools.

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