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## Democratising Turkey through student-centred pedagogy: opportunities and pitfalls

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Global reform talk on pedagogy has been converging around student-centred pedagogy (SCP) in recent decades. One of the significant appeals of this pedagogical model is its democratisation potentials. This article seeks to empirically study SCP's role in democratising learning and promoting social democratisation by taking the case of Turkey, a country whose democracy has been defined as being in acute crisis. The data are drawn from interviews with teachers and school management at eight public primary schools in Ankara. The study is mainly concerned with the potential of SCP in promoting democratic learning in classrooms, and understanding how broader social, cultural and political contexts support or impede such democratisation efforts. The paper will explore if adherence to democratic learning is more than rhetoric, particularly when serious limitations to social and political democratisation continue to persist in Turkey under the regime of the AKP.

### Introduction

A remarkable convergence has taken place in the pedagogical field since the 1990s, favouring approaches rooted in constructivism, a theory of learning which emphasises the active participation of learners in knowledge-construction processes (Anderson-Levitt 2003; Altinyelken 2012). This can be seen as an unusual convergence, since pedagogy, understood as 'both the act of teaching and the ideas, values, knowledge and evidence that shape and justify it' (Alexander 2015, 253) is highly context-dependent. 'Constructivism stresses the socially and culturally situated nature of the learner; their active involvement in the learning process; instructors as facilitators and learning by doing. In other words, learners are active constructors – or with teachers, co-constructors – of knowledge' (Schweisfurth 2011, 22). Student-centred pedagogy (SCP) is one of the approaches rooted in constructivism, and attained global education policy status by the late twentieth century. SCP underscores that knowledge, values and competencies should prioritise self-directed learning and learning to learn, and students should be encouraged to think critically, pose questions and discuss their viewpoints. Hence, it suggests a 're-culturing of the classroom' (Windschitl 2002) and proposes changes to the identity of students and teachers. Students are envisaged as autonomous, independent, responsible, communicative, and critical, fully engaged in co-constructing knowledge; while teachers are depicted as facilitators, mediators and knowledge brokers (Schweisfurth 2013).

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Student-centred pedagogy was introduced in diverse contexts globally, such as China (Guo et al. 2013), Uganda (Altinyelken 2010a), South Africa (Nykiel-Herbert 2004), Ethiopia (Serbessa 2006) and India (Sriprakash 2010). Its attractiveness to policy-makers and educationists is analysed from different theoretical perspectives (Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008; Altinyelken 2012; Schweisfurth 2013). One of the strongest arguments in this regard suggests that the diffusion of SCP has been mostly due to the assumptions that it is superior in stimulating competencies that are much in demand in the twenty-first century (Windschitl 2002). Hence, it can help to promote economic growth and sustain competitiveness in contemporary globalised economies. Despite the fact that there is not a single study which establishes such a direct and strong link between a pedagogical approach and economic growth (Alexander 2008), this premise persists in the minds of policy-makers in many contexts (see Altinyelken 2012). Another significant appeal of SCP, which is perhaps not lesser in importance to economic development discourse, is its promises of making learning more democratic (Sriprakash 2010) and potentials to promote democratic citizenship among children and young people (Anderson-Levitt 2003).

Empirical and review studies on pedagogical renewal globally, particularly in developing countries, illustrate that the majority of studies focus on how pedagogical reforms go through a metamorphosis at implementation stage, and how the policy itself fails to even penetrate into challenging contexts (Windschitl 2002; Westbrook et al. 2013). Few of these studies consider one of the most important promises of SCP, that is, democratisation (De Baessa, Chesterfield, and Ramos 2002; Tabulawa 2003; Sriprakash 2010), and examine to what extent this promise is translated into practice, or even taken seriously. This article seeks to address this gap within the context of Turkey, a country described as a 'democracy in crisis' (Freedom House 2014) or a 'post-modern authoritarianism' (Dagi 2012). Concerns about Turkish democracy are by no means peculiar to the twenty-first century, since it has been a major endeavour and a hotly debated topic since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The country retained a single-party rule until 1950 as earlier attempts to multi-party democracy failed. After 1950, centre-right parties have emerged victorious in almost all parliamentary elections, and the military intervened directly into politics four times in four decades (1960, 1971, 1980 and the 1997 post-modern coup). The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 and remained the predominant party in the following four parliamentary elections, though losing its majority in the Parliament in 2015. It has increasingly drifted 'towards an excessively majoritarian conception of democracy, or even an electoral authoritarianism of a more markedly Islamic character' (Özbudun 2014, 155).

SCP was introduced in the Turkish curriculum for primary schools in 2004 during a major curriculum review process, only two years after AKP came to power. It was accompanied by high aspirations, and announced as a 'revolutionary move' which would transform the Turkish education system and contribute to educating students who would think critically and challenge established authority (Güven and İscan 2006). Based on a broader research project which looked at the implementation of the 2004 Curriculum, this article seeks to analyse the potentials and limitations of SCP in terms of democratising learning in classrooms and contributing to social democratisation. The article is based on the perspectives of school management and teachers who work in primary schools in the capital city of Ankara, and some expert interviews.

The main research questions that guide the article are as follows: (1) To what extent does SCP promote democratic learning at primary schools and stimulate the

development of competences associated with democratisation? (2) What are the challenges to democratising learning and stimulating democratically oriented minds? And (3) How does cultural, social and political context support or impede democratisation efforts at classrooms? The article begins with reviewing theoretical approaches and studies on the topic and introducing the Turkish context of pedagogic change with a historical view. This is followed by a methods section which explains the methodological choices and the sample. Then, the findings are presented, focusing on how and to what extent learning has been democratised, and how the broader socio-cultural and political environment of the school has influenced democratisation potential of the SCP.

### **SCP and its democratic appeal**

Student-centred pedagogy has often been associated with the promise of child-friendly, participatory and democratic learning environments. It has an emancipatory, democratic flavour; that is, it has an in-built potential to promote democratisation of classrooms. Hence, it is not difficult to see the resonance of democracy with SCP among educationists and policy-makers (Sriprakash 2010; Schweisfurth 2013). For instance, within the context of South Africa, Nykiel-Herbert (2004) suggests that SCP has become popular in several developing countries that are making the transition to democracy, because it carries the promise of intellectual liberation and emancipation from traditional approaches that are considered oppressive. Furthermore, Carney (2008) maintains that SCP is part of an international agenda which aims to reform education systems worldwide in ways that promotes the spread of advanced capitalism and global democracy. As such, it represents a process of westernisation and cultural imperialism that aims to benefit the exporters of the education policy rather than the receivers of it. Tabulawa (2003) takes these ideas further and suggests that aid agencies were not interested in pedagogy until the early 1990s since they viewed it in technicist terms. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, they displayed an extraordinary interest and funded several pedagogical reform projects favouring SCP owing to its democratic tendencies and perceived strengths in stimulating democratic relationships. Tabulawa suggests that in the past three decades, the international donor community viewed political democratisation as a prerequisite for economic development, and within this global democratisation project, education, and pedagogy in particular, has assumed a central role.

This brings us to the question as to why has there been such trust in SCP in advancing social democratisation. In other words, in what ways can SCP promote democratic learning and democratisation in the broader society? Pedagogy ultimately relates to power relations within classrooms and beyond, and to the differential unequal positioning of teachers and students. In many countries, relationships within classrooms tend to be hierarchical, teachers enjoying an unquestionable authority position. SCP targets the substantive forms of such teacher authority, and strives to alter these power relations so that students and teachers relate to one another on a more equal footing. Learning is defined as a co-construction, a joint endeavour between students and teachers, not a one-way transmission from teachers to their students. It assumes that the subjects (students) are self-regulating their learning; they are active and creative in the construction of knowledge, of meanings and interpretations on studied topics. According to Dewey (1966), who is one of the most influential intellectuals who advocated democratic education and provided much theoretical inspiration to the development of progressive pedagogies, democratic learning environments can be created and stimulated by

facilitating participation of all students and organising group activities to allow students to engage with each other towards a common purpose.

A study (De Baessa, Chesterfield, and Ramos 2002) conducted in Guatemalan schools investigated the relationship between pedagogy and democratisation. The authors examined the extent to which an active learning environment helps to promote the democratic behaviour of rural children from different cultural backgrounds. Their study points to a positive relationship, suggesting that active learning helps children to take part in their own learning and contributes to democratic behaviour through participatory activities. They conclude that classroom environment can have a significant influence on democratic behaviour (e.g. helping behaviour, turn taking, directing others, expressing opinions), and participation in student-directed small groups is particularly seen as key to this process.

Another study in India (Sriprakash 2010) looked at the democratic thrust of child-centred pedagogy (CCP) in rural schools. The study particularly looked at how far CCP encouraged greater freedoms for children in their learning. The findings point out strong deficit assumptions among teachers about their students; strong framing of the interactions within the classroom; a focus on drilling, repetition and assimilation of knowledge and not co-construction of it; and how the notions of children's independence and responsibility were utilised to justify non-active teaching or even absence. The study demonstrates that despite the democratic language of reforms seeking to promote CCP, these models 'do not always seek to handover greater control to children in the instructional aspects of pedagogy' (Sriprakash 2010, 304). This suggests that the relationship between SCP and democratisation remains ambiguous.

## **A brief history of pedagogic change in Turkey**

### ***John Dewey and the village institutes***

Starting in the early years of the Turkish Republic, under the leadership of Atatürk, the authorities initiated a wide range of sweeping reforms to build a modern, secular, nation state, modelling to a large extent Western structures and life styles. The reform process included radical changes to reorganise the social, political and economic structures, including the abolition of the Caliphate, the establishment of the principle of secularism, the consolidation of all educational institutions under the control of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), and the introduction of the Latin alphabet. In his various speeches and deliberations, Atatürk underscored the significance of education in remoulding a nation state out of the remnants of an empire, and emphasised the agency of teachers as the carriers of the principles and the values of the new republic to the farthest corners of the country. Teachers were to be patriotic citizens who would introduce and model the republican principles to the new generations (Sönmez 2007).

Within this context, educating teachers in order to enable them to embrace, follow and preserve the principles of the Atatürk Revolution was deemed critical (Uygun 2008). Hence, John Dewey was invited to Turkey, to examine the education system and suggest a road map which would guide the overall restructuring efforts. Some argued that Dewey was particularly chosen because his progressive education was seen key to developing a modern and secular nation state (Biesta and Miedema 1996). Dewey was a pioneer of democratic education, and his educational philosophy also fitted with the democratic ideals of the Turkish educational reform movement (Uygun 2008). One of the important outcomes of Dewey's two months of research

and scoping visits in Turkey in 1924 was related to pedagogy. He suggested that pedagogical orientation and training should be emphasised, and that a progressive pedagogical approach characterised by democratic, relevant and practice-oriented learning should be adopted (Uygun 2008; Yılmaz 2009).

Inspired by these ideas, the Village Institutes (*Köy Enstitüleri*) were established in the 1940s in order to train teachers who would eventually be employed in village schools. These were boarding schools, offering a five-year secondary education in remote rural areas. The aim was not only to train teachers but also to transform the Turkish countryside, alleviate poverty and ignorance among peasants, improve living standards and promote the nationalist ideology (Arayıcı 1999; Akyuz 2009). These Institutes were radically different from previous educational experiments, as they emphasised ‘education for work’ and ‘learning by doing’. Although, the Institutes were earnestly embraced by their students and by the villages where they were located, they soon became subjected to intense political and ideological debate. For the leftist-oriented intellectuals, the Institutes were the embodiment of Kemalist populism (also known as Atatürkism) at its highest point, whereas several right-wing politicians and thinkers attacked them in a political climate of anti-communist hysteria. Indeed, the two high-level education policy-makers who were responsible for restructuring these Institutes were also accused of communism in the late 1940s (Uygun 2008). Some other critics of the Institutes suggested that they re-produced the rural-urban divide and were inadvertently serving to keep the poor peasants in the villages. Eventually, this unique educational experiment was abandoned in 1950 (Karaömerlioglu 1998), yet even decades after their closure the controversy around them perseveres.

### ***The 2004 curriculum and SCP***

All primary schools in Turkey use a centrally planned curriculum, organised by subjects. Before the recent curriculum change, primary schools were using a curriculum which had been in place since 1968. The content of the textbooks and some other curriculum materials has been modified in the past decades (e.g. in 1983, 1989, 1993 and 1998); however, a comprehensive review and revision of the primary school curriculum was not initiated before 2004 (Bülbul 2005). The 1968 curriculum was a subject-based curriculum and had a behaviourist approach, emphasising a teacher-centred didactic model and traditional assessment of recall. It was criticised for putting too much emphasis on frontal teaching, rote learning and memorisation of facts, and for creating little space for student participation and engagement (see Altinyelken 2010b).

Since the education system is highly centralised in Turkey, decisions on curriculum objectives, content, pedagogical approach and assessment are taken at the central level. Although the 2004 curriculum review process involved the participation of various educational stakeholders, there were significant concerns that the stakeholder participation was window-dressing and had legitimising purposes (Altinyelken 2010b). In its various reports and publications, the MoNE explains the rationale for curriculum change by referring to national needs, globalisation, the demands of the knowledge economy and harmonisation with European Union (EU) standards. Concerns about the education system included low education quality, pervasive inequalities in access to different levels of education, lack of relevance to contemporary social and economic developments, low student motivation and achievement levels, and the need to stimulate competencies that are in high demand in labour markets (MoNE 2005). Low achievement levels in PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and some other international tests were also used as a



point of reference by policy-makers to advocate the need for change and to legitimise curricular choices (Gultekin 2007). Moreover, harmonisation with EU policies and education standards has been an important motive. Turkey was granted ‘candidate’ status in 1999, and accession negotiations were opened in 2005 with Chapter 26, education and culture. Within this framework, curricular reforms were viewed as important steps to harmonise the Turkish education system with that of EU countries (Cayir 2009).

Curriculum 2004 introduced changes to the objectives and content of the curriculum, as well as to its pedagogical approach and assessment methods. The content of the curriculum, and its theoretical coverage was reduced, shifting the attention to the development of a series of competencies which are perceived as critical in today’s knowledge economies. Hence, there was a move away from a content-based towards a competency-based curriculum. Eight competencies are emphasised throughout the new educational programmes, including critical and creative thinking, communication, inquiry, problem-solving, using information technologies, entrepreneurship and language competencies in Turkish. Furthermore, the official discourse and the documents of the 2004 curriculum advocate increased student engagement, participation, activity-based learning, hands-on learning and research activities. Within the curricular documents, the role of teacher is defined as a ‘facilitator’ or ‘guide’ who is responsible for creating stimulating learning environments and mediating learning processes (MoNE 2005). Among the policy-makers, there was a conviction that SCP was superior in developing competencies. It was viewed as a modern and progressive approach (Altinyelken 2012). Furthermore, authentic assessment was adopted, and the educational programmes introduced some new assessment tools such as self-evaluation, peer evaluation, project and performance assignments, observation forms and student portfolios (MoNE 2005). The 2004 curriculum was first piloted in the 2004/2005 academic year in 120 public primary schools in 9 provinces across Turkey and in the following year, nation-wide implementation started in the first five grades at the same time (Educational Reform Initiative 2005). Teachers who participated in this study received two weeks of in-service training prior to piloting (except for one school where teachers were trained for two months). The training was offered by some select universities in Ankara and was subjected to a lot of criticisms owing to its short duration and low quality. Some of the issues raised in this context, included being theoretical and abstract, lacking practical guidance and being introduced to a new pedagogical approach through dry presentations (see Altinyelken 2011).

### Methodology

The article is based on a broader study conducted in 2009–2010 looking at the implementation of the 2004 Curriculum. There were 8 public primary schools participating in this study in Ankara, sampled from 25 schools which piloted the revised curriculum before nation-wide implementation. Owing to their involvement in piloting, these schools had one year longer experience with the revised curriculum, their teachers had longer in-service training in the ‘new’ curriculum, the schools received more resources, and had prolonged contact with the institutions involved in curriculum implementation. Hence, these schools were sampled as information-rich cases, allowing the study to go beyond stating the obvious, and exploring teachers’ reflections and experiences under the best possible circumstances.

The eight schools were located in different districts, in middle-to-low income neighbourhoods of Ankara. Schools were mostly very large, the number of students ranging

from 662 to 3339. Except for three, all the schools offered double-shift education, with the number of streams ranging between 44 to 108. The average number of teachers was 65. Teachers were selected randomly from Grades 1, 2 and 5. The first grades were selected because the results were compared with another country case study, and Grade 5 was added since at the time of the research these students were the only ones in Turkey who studied with SCP during their entire primary education. Fourteen school principals and deputy head teachers (13 male and 1 female), 69 teachers (57 female and 12 male) took part in this research. Teachers' age ranged between 30 and 64, the average being 40. In terms of education level, 5 had master's degrees, 62 were university graduates and only 2 teachers were graduates of teacher training institutes. The minimum years of experience were 9 and the maximum was 43, while the average was 16. The majority of teachers had work experience both in urban and rural settings across Turkey.

The analysis presented in this article is largely based on interviews with teachers and school management. In total, 69 interviews were conducted with teachers (26 teaching at Grade 1, 24 at Grade 2 and 19 at Grade 5) and 14 interviews with school management. Teacher interviews were often held in classrooms or staff rooms. The interviews were semi-structured: a list of general topics was prepared to make interviewing systematic and comprehensive. Yet, multiple other sub-topics were probed and explored. During interviews, teachers' views and experiences were sought on a range of issues relating to the revised curriculum, including its content, assessment, pedagogical approach, implementation challenges, reactions received from students and parents, and perceived outcomes. Moreover, interviews with some key informants in Ministry departments, education institutions, teacher unions and academics were conducted in order to contextualise the cases and reflect broader discussions.

The interviews ranged between 30 minutes and an hour, and data were recorded in written notes as teachers showed an apparent preference for this type of recording. The data were first organised by types of participants, and then the texts were read for a general understanding and for delineating emerging themes. A thematic analysis was done, and cross-sectional code and retrieve methods were used since a common system of codes was applied with a software program (ATLAS.ti) across the whole data-set and used as a means of searching for and retrieving chunks of labelled data (Spencer, Ritchie, and O'Connor 2003). A list of codes was developed based on theoretical review (particularly inspired by Bernstein 2000 and Sriprakash 2010), and additional ones were included during analysis. The main codes included democratic relationships in the classroom, student participation, self-expression, co-constructing knowledge, self-regulated learning, critical thinking, democratic school governance, democracy at home and democracy in broader society. The findings are presented below by way of using these concepts.

### **Democratising learning in Turkish classrooms through SCP**

Student-centred pedagogy was introduced into the Turkish education system with grand promises of change, and raising a lot of expectations, real or imagined. Teachers recalled statements from policy-makers and educationists close to the governing party at the time, condescending in tone and denouncing the past, and exalting SCP as a revolution, and a complete break from the past. An important dimension of this narrative was the democratic appeal of SCP in transforming learning in classrooms, which were often characterised as teacher-centred and authoritarian, with a focus on rote



learning. The majority of the teachers who participated in this study confirmed the democratising potentials of SCP, yet they also noted that whether these potentials were realised or not depended largely on how teachers mediated SCP in their practices. The discussion on democratising learning focused on four major aspects: democratic relationships in the classroom, student participation and self-expression, co-creating knowledge, and framing learning.

### ***Democratic relationships in the classroom***

The nature of the relationships between teachers and students, and among students is an important denominator of democratisation in classrooms. Social relations in the schools visited were highly hierarchical and teachers had visible authority. Most teachers were aware that SCP envisaged a change in their role, from being the conveyor of knowledge to having a mediator role in facilitating students' learning. Hence, some reframed their role as mediator, facilitator or guide. Assigning a central role to teachers in classroom processes was increasingly seen as authoritarian, uncaring and morally wrong. At the same time, students were perceived as autonomous learners, and were expected to assume more responsibility for their own learning and development. SCP also proclaimed that it should be students' interests and needs that guided the lessons, not teachers. According to some teachers, such changes in respective roles were having a democratising effect in the classroom, since they weakened the power of teachers in controlling learning processes, and conversely promoted students' authority and voice in what should be learnt, how and when.

While some teachers argued that SCP had a democratising effect in learning processes, several others warned that what teachers actually did in the classroom might be strikingly different from what the curriculum endorsed. Nevertheless, all teachers contended that classrooms in contemporary Turkey, at least those in the capital city, were rather different from how they used to be 10 or more years ago. They acknowledged that children tend to challenge more, or directly oppose, teachers compared to the previous generations, and it was more difficult for teachers to exert their authority. While some attributed these changes to the new pedagogical approach and a more democratic understanding of classroom life, several other teachers noted that the change was to be attributed to broader societal and cultural changes in Turkish society. The significance of cultural globalisation, and the influence of media and the internet was repeatedly brought up in such discussions.

### ***Student participation and self-expression***

Participation of students in classrooms and the degree to which they are given space and encouragement to express themselves is another important aspect of democratic learning. Such practices entailed learning for democracy through practising democracy in the classroom (Schweisfurth 2002). Although some teachers suggested that stimulating student engagement had always been an important objective of successful teachers, several other teachers believed that this had become more prominent with the introduction of SCP. Teachers noted that previously the lessons involved only a few children, but with the increasing penetration of SCP into classrooms, learning had become more participatory, engaging higher numbers of students in discussions. Likewise, previously, quiet classrooms were viewed as superior, since silence was a sign of successful classroom discipline and students spending time on task. Yet, after SCP, this had

changed dramatically; noise indicated that there were activities organised in the classroom, and signified more democratic and participatory learning activities.

The literature on democracy and pedagogy refers to the importance of group work as encouraging socially participatory learning. Although adoption of group work was the first – and in many cases the only – sign of SCP in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nykiel-Herbert 2004), group work was rarely organised in Turkish classrooms. Seating in groups was not practised because of space limitations and concerns regarding the effectiveness of such seating arrangements. A teacher explained that ‘We cannot change seating arrangements, so we do not do group work.’ There were also concerns that when students sat in groups they conversed a lot and concentrated less on the lesson.

There was a general conviction among teachers that with SCP children learned to become more self-confident, and they had more courage in expressing their viewpoints:

Children’s ability to express themselves improved. Previously, the subjects were more difficult, teachers were lecturing most of the time. Now, even the shyest students share their opinions. They are not concerned whether what they say is correct or not. (Teacher, grade 2)

Previously children were unable to speak to their teachers; they would be intimidated and shy. They would not know how to express themselves. Now, they explain themselves, they are active in classes. Their competencies are increasing. (Teacher, grade two)

It [SCP] is good because it engages everyone. Children are much more free, and comfortable. Before, there were more strict rules, and children were just listening to their teachers. Now their confidence is improving. They want to talk. (Social sciences subject teacher, grade 5)

Teachers discussed a number of challenges to promoting democratisation through increased student participation. These included relatively large classroom sizes which did not allow space for all students to be heard; the ‘noise’ and associated difficulties of maintaining classroom order; and subjects taking more time to teach, leading to time pressure and teacher stress to cover curriculum topics on time. Some teachers also maintained that discussions tend to develop in diverse directions, venturing into unrelated subjects. This made some teachers question the value of such discussions in terms of learning objectives. Furthermore, teachers noted that ‘too much’ freedom in the classroom created problems at times, some students violating the boundaries between students and teachers and behaving disrespectfully. Moreover, teachers received complaints from parents suggesting that their children only talked but did not learn much. These parents were concerned that their children would lag behind and they would be less likely to succeed in the entrance examination for the secondary schools.

Despite these reservations, there was a pervasive conviction that SCP has the potential to democratise learning in classrooms and might contribute to broader democratisation processes in Turkish society. The following quotations are interesting in that sense:

If we want citizens who can talk and defend their rights, then we need to have student-centred pedagogy. It has to start at an early age. Then we can educate a new generation. We were educated with ‘Stop, sit, stand up, do not talk’. No harm would come from someone who is able to talk. (Teacher, grade 1)

With teachers’ effort, this program can enable education of a new generation which would uphold democracy in Turkey. (Teacher, grade 2)

The problem of attributing causality was also brought up during these discussions. Some teachers believed that the new generations of children were simply different; they were exposed to a very different global curriculum via mass media. At the same time, teachers in contemporary Turkey were also different compared to old teachers. And so they were cautioning that so much of the change in children being more communicative and participatory was mistakenly attributed to SCP.

### *Co-creating knowledge*

Another important dimension of democratic learning is the opportunities for co-constructing knowledge. Various teacher accounts pointed out that the old curriculum was based on knowledge transfer, repetition and rote learning, leaving limited space for students to participate in co-creation of knowledge. The 2004 Curriculum is different, in the sense that the subject overload was significantly reduced, and the textbooks contain less factual information and more inquisitive questions and exercises. Furthermore, the 'new' curriculum tends to emphasise the development of competencies, one of which is research skills, requiring students to carry out small research assignments to complement and enhance what is learnt at school, and to strengthen self-regulated learning. The voice of 'knowledge' in the 2004 curriculum and the degree to which it created more opportunities for co-construction of knowledge was a hotly debated issue among teachers.

Some teachers viewed these developments positively and suggested that knowledge transmission was not the aim of the 2004 curriculum. The objective was to teach students how to access and make sense of information, stimulating their autonomy and control in their learning processes, thereby contributing to the development of skills that would make these children life-long learners. One teacher noted (grade 1), 'The program does not intend ready-made knowledge but to create reflective human beings.' Moreover, critical thinking – understood as forming opinions and asking critical questions – was highlighted as an important skill. Some of these teachers suggested that seeking information from a variety of sources and not considering 'teacher knowledge' as absolute truth stimulated such critical reflection and strengthened the democratising tendencies of learning processes. They suggested that compared to previous generations, these children have indeed become more critical, and they were able to raise important questions for their teachers and parents.

Nevertheless, a much higher number of teachers (more than half of the sample) viewed these issues very differently. First, they were displeased with the reduction of subjects in the curriculum and particularly in textbooks, rendering the books in their view entirely 'empty'. The books posed inquisitive questions repeatedly, and rather than giving information that can allow for reflections on these issues, the textbooks appeared to promote research assignments and some other classroom activities. These teachers noted that the development of critical thinking skills required a good knowledge base, otherwise the value of the discussions or the degree to which students could indeed take any critical stance on an issue was very questionable. Taking the example of the social sciences textbook, a teacher noted that 'The book is boring and superficial. It is the course that might stimulate discussions most, but students are not inspired at all.'

Furthermore, these teachers questioned the assumptions behind research assignments, referring to it as a 'fallacy'. They maintained that in order for SCP to contribute to democratisation and the stimulation of learning, students need to be well-prepared for

the discussions in the classroom. Yet, they tended to delegate research assignments to their parents or siblings, and often they used stationery shops, which provided a print-out of Google search results. Consequently, the potential of research assignments was not realised since students did not even read the printouts; they simply took them to class. The extent of students' delegating their responsibility to their parents was so high that the 'new' pedagogy came to be known among many as 'parent-centred pedagogy'.

What is more, these teachers pointed to differential outcomes of such practices for students from diverse backgrounds. They noted that students who had access to computers, the internet, and educational materials at home, and whose parents were well-educated and invested more time in supporting their children's education benefited much more from such pedagogical practices. In other words, students with more material, cultural and linguistic resources learnt more, developed higher critical thinking skills and participated more in the classroom. These comments suggest that although SCP itself is a progressive pedagogical approach, it might end up becoming an elitist pedagogy in highly unequal societal contexts such as Turkey. Consequently, in a paradoxical way, a pedagogical approach with high democratic appeals might end up becoming anti-democratic as a result of reinforcing large gaps in learning outcomes for diverse socio-economic groups (see Altinyelken 2011). Sriprakash (2013, 333) raises similar concerns for rural children in India during the implementation of learner-centred pedagogy:

[They] are not likely to have the same access to social and material resources to help them navigate school expectations as their urban, middle-class counterparts. Yet, with the 'self as project' they are expected to be independent and responsible for their own learning.

### ***Framing learning***

According to Bernstein (2000, 12) 'framing is about who controls what' in learning processes and knowledge construction. SCP is associated with weaker framing of interactions and learning activities by teachers and curriculum documents. Nevertheless, several teachers noted that interactions as well as student talk were rather framed by teachers in most of the cases, since student participation tended to be directed by teacher questions and brief student answers. However, some argued that the framing was even more strongly exercised by textbooks and workbooks, which included a wide range of activities, advising that the majority of lesson time should be spent on activities. An additional level of framing was added by the fact that the activities themselves were too prescribed, diverting away from constructivist understanding. Moreover, at a macro level, two powerful mechanisms of framing were pointed out: the first related to the highly centralised nature of the education system in Turkey which did not allow much flexibility for adopting curriculum to the local needs. This was discussed as a major contradiction in terms of constructivist learning in some other studies as well (Yilmaz 2009). The second macro-level framing is imposed by the persistence of a performance-oriented culture at schools. As discussed in more detail in the article by Arnd and Nazli in this special issue, the Turkish education system remains highly competitive and examination-oriented. This puts pressure on teachers and students to perform well in examinations, and focus on themes covered by them (see Altinyelken 2013 for a discussion of this).

### **Democracy beyond classrooms**

Schools are a microcosm of broader society, hence they mirror and often reproduce patterns that are persistent in their environment. Consequently, an important dimension of the discussions focused on democracy within school, family, work life and politics in general. Teachers, school principals and other experts interviewed confirmed that the democratic principles that the schools were attempting to promote needed to be sustained and supported by broader social, cultural and political contexts. Otherwise, their influence might remain rather limited. Nevertheless, their accounts often implied that the influence of the socio-political environment on democratisation in classrooms was mostly negative, giving contradictory and confusing messages to children.

### ***Democracy in school governance***

Some school principals and teachers reaffirmed that they need to promote and model democratic principles through their practices. Their ability to inspire democratic values and attitudes in students depended on the extent to which they themselves worked in a democratic system and had the right and space to express their own opinions in the governance of schools. One of the school principals, who was in charge of a school enrolling almost 3000 students and 100 teachers, stated that:

In Turkey, in none of the schools, can a decision be taken without the consent of the school principal. Without a principal, you cannot even organise a meeting. In this school, teachers do whatever I ask them to do. They hardly ever dare to challenge decisions taken by the principal. There is even no decision making system at this school. (School principal)

He argued that as long as the structure and organisation of schools remain undemocratic, they cannot promote democratic values among students. In other words, such authoritarian governance structures would inevitably fail to promote a democratic culture. He concluded that 'Only when we as teachers and school principals integrate democratic values, would we be able to promote a democratic culture in classrooms as well.' Such sentiments and convictions were shared by many others.

### ***Democracy at home***

Outside of school, home is the environment which has the strongest socialisation impact on children, hence it is highly important to consider to what extent child-rearing practices and adult-child relationships in Turkey are supportive of democratic values endorsed by SCP. Several teachers noted that the philosophy of the SCP was not compatible with the culture and the upbringing of children in patriarchal Turkish society, since authoritarian parenting styles tended to be common. In such a culture it is not common to involve children in decision-making or in discussions in general. An official from the Board of Training and Education (TTK) suggested that SCP aimed to change this culture by conferring new freedoms on children to which they were not used:

We have always liked children who sit quietly. Both at home and at school. Schools did not like students who oppose things; they [teachers] got infuriated at students who did not accept and internalise what they were told. This pedagogy is trying to alter this.

Indeed, some teacher comments pointed to changes in this direction, for example, instances of children challenging their parents or teachers. In some cases, the value orientation promoted within classrooms clashed with parental expectations and values, and caused tension. Commenting on the same topic, another government official maintained that while SCP introduced changes into culture, they would at the same time liked to protect traditional values, such as respecting persons who are older than you, which is often at odds with SCP's appeal to challenge and question what is being told.

Some of the teachers were less optimistic that SCP could alter culture as such and introduce more democratic practices. A teacher commented that:

Sometimes parents do the opposite of what we teach here. Children tend to model, that is how they learn, and parents are very influential. From TV, children do not get good role models either. Hence what they learn at school remains at school. (Teacher, grade 2)

### ***Democracy in Turkish society, working life and politics***

Similar to the comments made about Turkish family life, several teachers and experts remarked that hierarchical and authoritarian ways of relating to one another were common in Turkish society. An official from TTK maintains that 'Military service is about obedience, a lot of workplaces and their promotion policies require the same.' More importantly, the political climate was seen as becoming increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic, generating anxieties and fears about the future of democracy in Turkey. Anti-democratic discourses and practices of policy-makers were seen in direct contradiction to the values teachers were attempting to instil in schools. For instance, Erdogan, Turkey's Prime Minister in the past decade and the current President, is known for his 'angry, condescending, and authoritarian tone' (Özbudun 2014, 157), which directly contradicts the values teachers were asked to promote in their classrooms. A teacher noted that 'We teach children how to express themselves freely but the society, the political system restricts this. Media, newspapers are all controlled by the government, there is no freedom of expression' (teacher, grade five). The following teacher accounts further illustrate these points:

When children grow up, they will find out that things do not work out as we teach here. Critical thinking or speaking the truth might actually put them in danger. They might encounter serious trouble within this system. (Teacher, grade one)

This program [SCP] does not relate to the realities of our society. Especially in the current political environment. It is a time during which criticism is highly problematic. You are stamped immediately. (Social Sciences subject teacher, grade 5)

These apprehensions were confirmed when last year, a 16-year-old high school student, whose father was also a teacher, was arrested and later convicted for insulting the President. The student read out a statement during a public gathering praising secularism and criticising Erdogan and the AKP government for corruption and bribery (*Reuters* 2014).

Consequently, there was much confusion among teachers about what they were trying to achieve: teaching children how to think critically and share their viewpoints in a socio-political environment which does not appreciate or often does not even tolerate this. This raises the question, posed by one teacher: 'What is the point?' A recent



report from Freedom House demonstrates that these are not just the sentiments of a few teachers. The report maintains that '[Turkey] remains a country where criticising the government means risking your livelihood, your reputation, and sometimes your freedom' (Freedom House 2014, 4). The Village Institute experience is also interesting in this respect, since one of the reasons for their being closed down was the type of students the Institutes were educating. At the time, the graduates were increasingly perceived as too disobedient and self-confident, and 'too eager' to object to any kind of social injustices. According to Karaömerlioglu (1998), the authorities felt increasingly uneasy about this and perceived them at times as a potential threat to the traditional conservatism of the ruling elite.

Despite all of this, a few teachers and experts remained more optimistic about what can be achieved or had already been achieved. For instance, an official from the MoNE argued that SCP can change Turkish culture and political climate:

We can educate a new generation who can think scientifically, who does not act according to some dogmas. We are teaching them [students] that there is no single truth. This can bring more tolerance to differences of opinion in our society.

Likewise, some teachers contended that SCP has already changed new generations, rendering them more participatory and democratic:

These children can be more confrontational when they grow up. It would be more difficult to deceive them. We teach them to question things. The political system might find this troublesome. (Teacher, grade 2)

The previous curriculum was raising children just like robots. We no longer have students who nod affirmatively to everything said and say yes. (Social sciences subject teacher, Grade 5)

This pedagogy enables everyone to express their opinion. It would be difficult to rule the new generation. It brings an educational approach that strengthens the democratic system. (School principal)

## Conclusion

Since the early years of modern Turkey, because of its transformative potential, school pedagogy received attention in an effort to advance the modernisation, democratisation and the Westernisation of the new Republic. Inspired by Dewey's ideas, Village Institutes were established in the 1940s, where learning by doing, education for work and critical thinking were emphasised. Though they were crucial for the spreading of nationalist ideology and transforming the Turkish countryside, soon the Institutes became the major focus of political and ideological controversy. Hence, this unique experiment was abandoned in the early 1950s. Decades later, in 2005, a school pedagogy advocating learning by doing, critical thinking and democratic principles was introduced to primary schools after a major curriculum review process. The 'new' pedagogical approach, framed as SCP, echoed similar reform initiatives around the globe (Altinyelken 2012; Schweisfurth 2013), and aimed at democratising learning by increasing student engagement, interactions and participation. This study demonstrates that the discourse of SCP in Turkey has democratic appeal but the practice appears to fail in meeting the expectations.

There was a range of favourable outcomes which relate directly or indirectly to the democratisation of learning and the development of competencies that are supportive of social democratisation. These included improvements in classroom engagement, participation, self-confidence, improved willingness to share viewpoints with others, and the stimulation of skills, such as forming opinions and self-expression. However, learning continued to be framed strongly by teachers, textbooks, and the centralised and examination-oriented nature of the education system. Furthermore, co-construction of knowledge with students proved to be more difficult than envisaged by curriculum designers, often leading to chaos rather than meaningful and transformative learning.

The extent to which favourable outcomes were achieved depended on the ability of the teachers, their own attitudes in the classroom, and how they mediated the pedagogical approach in their classrooms. Effective mediation of democratic pedagogical practices assume and demand changes in adult–child relationships. However, in cultural contexts such as Turkey, teachers might have difficulty in loosening their authority and acting in democratic ways (Yilmaz 2009). Since students tend to emulate teachers' attitudes and values, it is imperative to train teachers (see Schweisfurth 2002) to allow them to interrogate their own beliefs and reflect on their normative orientation and worldviews on democracy. Such pre-service and in-service training need to improve their awareness of behavioural dispositions that might contradict with democratic principles and to activate additional ones that would support democratisation.

In addition to that of teachers, the role of students in democratising learning is highly important. In particular, their response to the new learner identities as autonomous, self-directed and engaged is crucial to transforming classrooms. The 'voice of the young learners' is often missing in studies looking at the implementation of progressive pedagogies (Schweisfurth 2011), yet there is a tacit assumption that students would welcome such a role change and would prefer to be active and self-regulating learners. Unfortunately, student perspectives were not included in this study either, and teacher accounts did not highlight these complexities. Hence, this is one of the critical areas on which future research can focus. Studies on this issue point out that students might resist their new roles and their learner identities. Yilmaz's study on secondary schools in Turkey suggests that 'students may not be ready or willing to be at the centre of instruction; have difficulty in becoming active learners; and prefer passive teaching methods that reduce their own workload or help them to "cram" for high-stakes tests' (Yilmaz 2009, 32–33). Moreover, Tabulawa's (2004, 53) study in Botswana illustrates that 'classroom reality ... [is] a "co-construction", a joint project by teacher and students. Attempts to change this reality, therefore, must include both teacher and students'.

Policy-makers tend to compartmentalise as they are intent on change and introducing new educational policies. However, the external environment presses upon and shapes the internal characteristics of the classrooms in a host of ways. By doing so, these external pressures also influence curriculum implementation practices. Teacher accounts of pedagogy and democracy in this article demonstrate that children received different stimuli from the outside world. For instance, the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of political and social environments, and increasing limitations on freedom of speech, give a much stronger message to children that dissenting voices are not welcome, and worse, they cannot be tolerated. Indeed, Turkey leads the world in the number of imprisoned journalists, and the bullying and censoring of media by the government has been pervasive (Freedom House 2014, 3). This makes many

educationalists feel rather cynical about the attempts to promote critical thinking. Hence, as we embark on enhancing education's democratisation capacity, we need to ask 'when young learners are ready to question authority, or, perhaps more accurately, when those in authority are ready to be questioned by young learners' (Schweisfurth 2013, 22). It is important to note that none of the sources of influence sketched in this article is likely to appear in isolation in children's lives. These processes interact and feed on each other in multiple ways. As Windschitl (2002, 132) emphasises, 'failure to attend to any one of [the] dimensions can compromise or doom teachers' attempts to implement progressive pedagogies in their classrooms'.

Turkish democracy is in disarray. With its increasingly polarised political arena and society, and the AKP's intensified shift towards conservatism and authoritarianism (Özbudun 2014), democratisation is ever more imperative in Turkey. Education remains critical to democratisation since it is an important socialisation arena, and involves the emancipatory potential of pedagogical processes and practices. The long-term implications of SCP in this endeavour remain to be seen.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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