

## **The Constructivist Curriculum Reform in Turkey in 2004–In fact what is constructed?<sup>i</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*This article evaluates the curriculum reform implemented in Turkey in 2004 by the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The curriculum reform targeted primary school education and reorganized the curriculum for several primary school courses. The AKP declared that renewed curricula would replace the former behaviorist approach, which had been criticized for being supportive of rote learning and teacher-centered education, with a constructivist approach. Unlike the behaviorist approach, the constructivist approach favors student-centered education and gives students more active role in the learning process. The purpose of this article is to examine the “content” of education reorganized with the constructivist approach, rather than providing a merely pedagogical discussion on these approaches.*

*The critics of the reform argue that the major purpose of the reform has been to make educational content compatible with the neoliberal discourse and with the process of globalization, which will eventually result in the training of a qualified labor power necessary for the neoliberal economy. In this respect, the reform has played a role for strengthening the establishment of neoliberal discourse in Turkey’s educational arena. This article explores how concepts and practices specific to the neoliberal discourse are constructed in the curriculum reform through comparative analysis of previous and renewed curricula for primary school Social Studies course. It also utilizes information gathered from the in-depth interviews conducted with the architects of the reform in order to explore its rationale. The article manifests that the curriculum reform in Turkey should be considered as a part of*

*educational reform initiatives which have been simultaneously implemented in many developing countries throughout the world to integrate the neoliberal discourse in educational systems.*

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism, education reform, constructivism, curriculum, Turkey.

## Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power as a single party in Turkey, has signed very important changes in education until the year 2014. These educational changes have fundamentally shifted the philosophy of education in Turkey (Inal, 2005). One of the main effective and extensive amendments in the educational system has been done with the primary school curriculum reform. The curriculum change was put into implementation in 2004 and reorganized teaching methods, teacher training, textbooks, and so on. The AKP declared that renewed curriculum would replace the former old-fashioned behaviorist approach, which had been criticized for being supportive of rote learning and teacher-centered education, with a constructivist approach (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2004a, p.227-228). The constructivist approach has introduced a number of new concepts into the educational system, such as student-centered education, guidance teacher, multiple intelligence approach, and educational duties on efficiency and performance.

The purpose of this article is to examine the “content” of education reorganized with the constructivist approach, rather than providing a merely pedagogical discussion on these two approaches. The position taken in here is that with the introduction of the new curriculum along with its other amendments in education (e.g., privatization attempts), the AKP aimed at adjusting Turkey’s education system into neoliberal globalization. In this respect, the AKP played a role for solidifying the neoliberal ideology in Turkey’s educational system. AKP’s positive attitudes towards globalization and its economic policies implemented to be part of the world markets constituted a background for educational in general and curriculum reforms in particular in Turkey. The curriculum

reform, therefore, was meant to target not only pedagogical approach (i.e., behaviorist approach) but also the content of education to train a qualified labor power which is compatible with the neoliberal ideology and brings a fruitful economic outcomes in a highly globalizing world. The AKP considered the curriculum reform as the main vehicle to drive Turkish society and economy from a peculiar nation-state's values into a knowledge-based society with a huge expected economic benefit. Performing the most structural educational reform in recent years in Turkey, the ruling party's identity stands out in this context to understand what all these changes or transformations are meant to be. But first of all, one should focus on the economic transformation of educational systems toward a neoliberal globalization.

## **Neoliberalism and Transformation of Education**

Neoliberalism has been the dominant economic model for almost all Western countries as well as for some Eastern countries since the early 1980s. To define neoliberalism, the words of Teeple (1995) are very illuminating:

Neo-liberal free market economics—the purpose of which is to avoid states and keep businesses in healthy flux-functions as type of binding arbitration, legitimizing a host of questionable practices and outcomes: deregulation, unrestricted access to consumer markets, downsizing, outsourcing, flexible arrangements of labor, intensification of competition among transnational corporations, increasing centralization of economic and political power, and finally, widening class polarization. Neo-liberalism is currently embarking on ways of “re-imagining” democracy through the importation of the market discourse of parasitic financial oligarchies into increasingly domesticated democratic practices and through the valorization of capital and the unrestrained economic power of private poverty (cited in McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2001, p.137).

In line with the principles of neoliberalism, education has been increasingly transformed to meet the competitive needs of corporations within globalizing markets. In other words, education has been reorganized to support the dominant neoliberal economic policies

promoted by governments and corporations (Hursh, 2000). The connection created between neoliberalism and education has paved the way to *“the sale of education as a commodity on the global market”* (Dale, 2005, p.118).

In addition to neoliberalism, globalization has highly affected education systems in recent years. As Spring (1998) states, education under globalization can be discussed in two different dimensions:

First, education under globalization is viewed as a vehicle that assists the growing market economy. For many developing countries, an educated and skilled workforce ostensibly would mean higher levels of productivity and economic development. Second, is viewed as a tool in solving problems associated with economic globalization such as unemployment and poverty ... the goal of education should be to assist in the expansion of the market economy (cited in McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2001, p.139)

Moreover, neoliberalism and globalization go hand in hand and a neoliberal agenda in education heavily stresses *“global competitiveness, the reduction of the (publicly financed) costs of education, and of social reproduction in general, the necessity for greater market choice and accountability and the imperative to create hierarchically conditioned, globally oriented state subjects”* (Mitchell, 2003, p.388).

It is also important to note the increasing role of the World Bank, which is one of the decisive institutions of the financial architecture, in the process of educational adjustment to neoliberal ideology. As Bonal (2004) indicates, *“during the past 20 years, the World Bank has noticeably intensified its activities relating to education, from both a quantitative and qualitative point of view. New loan commitments for education rose from 4% of the Bank’s budget in 1980 to more than 9% in 1999”* (p.649). These loan policies conducted through the World Bank have been quite effective in transforming the educational structures, contents and the policies of the periphery countries in the last 25 years. During these years, the Bank has identified four important reform areas under the title of Global Education Reform that created a neoliberal institutionalization in education. These four reform areas expressed by

the World Bank are as follows: Governance Reform, Financing Reform, Teacher Reform and Curriculum Reform (World Bank, 2002). Not surprisingly, the loan policies of the Bank have been increasingly effective to push the countries towards constituting a more neoliberal model of educational structure. As Bonal (2004) rightly notes,

[t]his is a key point in understanding the World Bank's capacity to influence the direction of education policy in developing countries. Although, in quantitative terms, educational financing channeled through the Bank may represent a relatively small percentage of a country's domestic educational budget, the conditional nature of these credits increases their influence on the administration and management of educational systems (p.650).

In the context of neoliberalism and globalization, the business community has also come with a new definition of an employee. Companies of the neoliberal and global market economy seek for employees who can *“think creatively, adapt flexibly to new work demands, identify as well as solve problems, and create complex products in collaboration with others—all supposed benefits of constructivist learning environments”* (Windschitl, 2002, p.135). An individual in general and an employee in specific have begun to be considered as the competitive and instrumentally rational, so that he/she will be able to have competence in the marketplace (Peter, 1994 in Hursh, 2000). As Hursh (2000) states, within neoliberal educational system, schools are not evaluated for whether students become liberally educated citizens but whether they become economically productive workers. The educational system focuses on producing efficient workers who will be able to have the capacity to adapt and develop new skills and work toward the aims of ownership (ibid.).

In the recent years, a high number of educational systems over the world have stressed the “importance” of multi-skilled flexible workforce that will constantly be in the process of trying to fit the needs of the business community. To support the demands of the business community, governments in various countries have called for educational subjects such as schools, teachers, and students to meet

the changing challenges of international competition and the changing workplace (ibid.). Therefore, educational reform efforts have been put into practice to develop students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will eventually make them productive workers. These efforts have further aimed at centering learners (i.e., students) in the teaching process and promoting the idea of individuality. A number of countries, such as China and those in sub-Saharan Africa readjusted their societies to the demands of the market economy (Carney, 2008) through educational reforms. Discourse of these reforms concentrates on the rhetoric of curriculum change and modernization (Bonal, 2003), and they are based on the constructivist education approach (Kosar-Altinyelken, 2010). Constructivist curriculum and/or pedagogy has been instantly appealed since governments and the business community assume that it will carry *"the promise of intellectual liberation from 'oppressive' traditional approaches"* (Nykiel-Herbert, 2004, p.249). Not surprisingly, then, the focus of the constructivist approach is on individual and it stresses that an individual needs to construct knowledge himself/herself. The next section of the article presents the AKP's approach to education.

## **The AKP and the Education System**

It has been well-acknowledged by various circles that the AKP is a neoliberal political party (Yavuz, 2010; Inal, 2009; Uzgel, 2009; Bedirhanoglu, 2009). Indeed, Yavuz (2010) declared clearly the fact that the AKP has a tendency to promote market forces and to support the neoliberal project in Turkey. In addition, the hegemonic project of the AKP can be called "neoliberal populist" due to the fact that the Party has also tried to create a historical bloc by subordinating the poor segments of the society to the hegemonic project of the ruling classes. This hegemonic project of neoliberal populism does not contradict with the general rules of capital accumulation. In a way it deepens the neoliberalization process through the implementation of a populist agenda which is in conformity with the agenda of international institutions of the financial capital such as World Bank and the IMF (Yildirim, 2009).

Although the AKP comes from an Islamic fundamentalism, namely National View (*Milli Görüş*) tradition of Necmettin Erbakan and is governed by a Muslim staff, it is a political party which accepts the globalizing capitalist system based on the logic of the free market relations and economic competition. Indeed, the party chairman and Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has repeatedly declared that the AKP is a liberal party on the basis of “conservative democracy.”<sup>ii</sup> The language and discourse used by the prime minister and party staff manifest the political space on which the party stands. For example, , the AKP described education in the 60<sup>th</sup> government’s educational program as an activity to be continued lifelong to create human capital needed to compete in the world (Memurlar.net, 2008). Due to the passion and the goal to be an important actor on the world stage by adapting to the globalization and neoliberalism, the party’s educational view has been established through a language of neoliberal education. Some other concepts such as competition, quality, responsiveness to the needs of globalization, adaptation to the business world’s needs, which all reflect neoliberal understanding at the party program, indicate the educational framework of the Party. Several statements and articles by the former Minister of National Education, Hüseyin Çelik, and the architect of the new primary school curriculum reform, Ziya Selçuk, suggest that the two main planes of AKP are neoliberalism and globalization (Inal, 2009, p.690). For instance, the AKP defines students and their parent as “customers” under the concept of “Total Quality School” (EARGED, 2003, p.27). At this point words by Ziya Selçuk are very meaningful:

[a] kind of education which was not integrated with the world, unable to make a connection between education and production, insensitive to national and global sensitivities, unable to perform functions has emerged. The pressure of globalization which was experienced today thoroughly exposed the failure of the system. Globalization today has become a threat against the national and local things. After 50 years, continuation of strong presence of national cultures and local wealth depends on balanced configuration of local and globalization (Inal, 2009, p.691).

As shown in the expression above, AKP's official experts prefer, on the one hand, to bustle the globalization train, while on the other hand demand this process not to have a negative impact on the local culture. When the applications were examined, it has been observed that since 2002 many of the AKP's educational applications are realized within a huge educational market: e.g. publishing millions of textbooks at the private printing houses instead of the state printing houses, requesting the sale of state schools in central areas of the cities due to their high price, promoting privatization in education through facilitating the establishment of private educational institutions, collaborating with the private sector for vocational and technical training schools, and forcing the School-Parent Associations (*Okul Aile Birliği*) to work as a commercial enterprise (Inal, 2009, p.691-692; Yildirim, 2006). AKP's supports to neoliberal ideology and globalization have been explicitly reflected in the primary school curriculum reform. The next section provides information about the study.

## Method of Inquiry

In order to analyze the impact of neoliberal policies on education, two different methods of inquiry are utilized in this study: in-depth interviews and temporal difference analysis of curricula. Five semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in this study. The purpose in conducting in-depth interviews was to give voice to the architects of the reform. In-depth interview questions mainly addressed a range of issues, including the rationale behind the curriculum change, preparation process of the reform, challenges and criticisms of different actors. One of the five interviews was conducted with the head of the General Directorate of Primary Education who was in office during the reform process. The remaining four interviews were conducted with members of the Social Studies Course Curriculum Committee.<sup>iii</sup> In the selection of the key informants, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilized. The General Directorate of Primary Education and some committee members were academicians and their contact information was available online. They were sent an invitation email to participate in in-depth interviews. Four of them accepted the invitation while two of them rejected because of being abroad. The rest of the committee members were teachers and their contact information was not available

online. Hence, the contact information of only three teachers could be reached through aforementioned interviewees. Those teachers were also invited to participate in this study and one of them agreed to participate. So, five interviews were conducted in total.

The in-depth interviews took place between March and May 2010. Each interview was about one to two hours long. All interviews were taped, and the records were transcribed. These transcriptions were used for quoting in the analysis when it was necessary. To provide a guide for the quotations from the key informants, the categories used to refer to these informants are as follows: Key informant A, Key informant B, Key informant C, Key informant D and Key informant E. The interviews were analyzed by using ATLAS.ti, a computer software program used in qualitative data analysis. For this purpose, the interview data was coded through the codes related to the reasons for the reform, the reform process, and the contemporary problems of primary education.

Another method of inquiry utilized in this study is the temporal difference analysis. This method is used to analyze the previous and renewed Social Studies curricula. The purpose in conducting this analysis is to make a comparative and descriptive study of how the curricula have changed in terms of the structure and subjects they cover over time. In this respect, formal features of the social studies curricula are described, and the emphasis devoted to several subjects, such as individualism, are identified. Based on the findings, the curricula are compared.

The temporal difference analysis covers the 1968 Social Studies curriculum and the 2004 Social Studies curriculum. The curricula were chosen to be analyzed because they are major documents of the reform. Moreover, their analysis illustrates the differences in MoNE's approach towards social studies courses. To conduct temporal difference analysis, the curricula were compared with regard to their emphasis on issues relating enterprise, consumption, individualism, and economic activities. The comparison of the findings of the curricula's analysis helps to illuminate the rationale behind the 2004 reform<sup>iv</sup>.

## **Rationale for the Reform**

1968 was the last time that MoNE reorganized primary school curriculum. To put it differently, the same curriculum was in practice between 1968 and 2004. Rather than developing a comprehensive amendment during this time period, the governments preferred making minor changes to the content of the education system. The most significant amendment prior to the 2004 reform was the 1997 passage of a law that introduced an eight-year compulsory education system. This law replaced the education system that had consisted of five-year primary schools and three-year lower level secondary schools with a new system consisting of eight-year primary schools. This joined curricula of primary education and lower-secondary general education introduced foreign language teaching from grade four and cancelled vocational and religious electives. However, the curriculum base for the eight-year compulsory education remained the same as the 1968 national curriculum (Dulger, 2004, p.7). Although the MoNE has been attempting to revise the national curriculum since the mid-1990s, the revisions were carried out in individual content area curricula. To illustrate, the MoNE revised the mathematics curriculum in 1998 and the science curriculum in 2000 (Koc, Isiksal and Bulut, 2007, p.32) before a comprehensive curriculum amendment was initiated in 2003 by the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

For several reasons, the AKP has underlined the necessity of making a fundamental reform in education. The Party writes in its party program that the national education system of Turkey is not sufficient to respond to the requirements of the contemporary world. It is not compatible with technological developments and not able to develop human capital that is necessary for today's world (AKP, 2001). The Party began to work on the preparation of new primary school curriculum in early 2003 and completed it in 2004. In the context of the reform, curriculum of primary school Turkish (1-5), Life Knowledge (1-3), Science and Technology (4-5) and Social Studies (4-5) were rearranged by MoNE. In 2004–2005 academic year, in a pilot scale, these rearranged curricula were in practice in nine cities (Ankara, Bolu, Diyarbakir, Hatay, Istanbul, Izmir, Kocaeli, Samsun and Van) and in 120 primary schools (MoNE, 2005a, p.47). In the following academic year, nationwide implementation started

at all grades of the primary school at the same time (Bikmaz, 2006 in Kosar-Altinyelken, 2010, p.105).

The question that ought to be asked with regard to the reform is “why did the AKP government initiate a structural change in primary school education?” To answer this question, we utilized MoNE’s publications on this matter and in-depth interview data. In the 2005 published report, the MoNE explains the reasons and targets of the curriculum reform:

Course programs were not aligned with the present conditions, and that was one of the most problematic sides of the national education system. Turkey neglects all the changes made in the education sphere so far. The curriculums were renewed 40 years ago ... Students will not be like a computer disk any more with the new curriculum. Students will be educated as a student that produces, questions, thinks, follows the scientific developments and that are responsive to the needs of social life (MoNE, 2005b, 59).

The MoNE considered the education system old-fashioned, and consequently the system was rearranged in alignment with the present conditions. Similarly, the key informants pointed out that education systems in many countries, including those in the periphery and semi-periphery, have been reorganized and Turkey had to be progressive as well. The *Key informant C* said that “*will Turkey lag from the global developments without making changes?*” The *Key informant E* stated that “*we were in a junction: either being isolated from the world or heading towards an education system based on production and cognition.*” The informants’ statements suggest that Turkey followed a similar pattern with many other countries in order to be part of a global system. Moreover, key informants stated that the previous curriculum was not compatible with technological developments; therefore it should be rearranged accordingly. The *Key informant B*, for example, stated that “*in the contemporary world, there is a transition from knowledge to technology. However, it was not possible for our children to compete with other country’s children with the previous curriculum which was not sensitive to economic and technological improvements.*” This statement addresses not only the technological developments, but also the

economic incentives behind the reform. It supports the argument by Olssen and Peters (2005) that the transition from industrial economy to knowledge economy has necessitated the rethinking of the relationship between education, learning, work, and economy. The *Key informant B* noted the power of knowledge stating that *“in order to guarantee the future of Turkey, we have to create students who are competitive and this happens only if students acquire necessary skills, and access and produce knowledge.”* The statement shows that according to the key informant, the purpose of education should be the creation of competitive students. The informant considers the knowledge as a tool that gives power to students to be competitive in the international arena. Furthermore, the *Key informant E* stated that *“Turkey has had a promising progress in economy. Look at the economic performance of Turkey since the 1990s. In order to protect and improve our economic success, we have to amend our education system and educate people to be sensitive towards these demands.”* Similarly, the *Key informant C* underlined the importance of catching up with global changes stating that *“we cannot be successful if we resist transformation. Otherwise we produce imperfect students.”* These two quotations have two crucial implications. First, education is for the market economy. Second, students who are not compatible with the market are considered as “imperfect.” However, there is a significant point which has been neglected during the reform process: Those students who try to be familiarized with economic activities and terms are only ten and/or eleven years old.

Not surprisingly, the reform has been criticized due to its emphasis on the connection between economy and education. As Yildiz (2008, p.25) rightly argues, rather than providing students the opportunity to develop themselves in the way that they really want, this reform aims to educate them as economic inputs of neoliberal economy and future labor power. Students are expected to have a more entrepreneurial character and make cost/benefit analysis in all spheres of their life (Inal, 2008; Keskin, 2008). The emphasis on the connection between economy and education is very crucial in terms of illustrating the fact that impacts of globalization and neoliberalism on education do not only result in privatization or liberalization of education systems. In addition to the

privatization of education systems, students have also been commodified. In other words, students have become to be regarded as a marketable commodity (Apple, 2001).

As Sayilan (2006) states, the new curriculum constructed the content of education in the way that it will serve for the market demands. The main emphasis of the new curriculum is not put either on democracy or social solidarity. The emphasis is put on producing rational individuals who are responsive to the economy (İnal, 2005). The amendments indicate that producing students complying with the entrepreneurship feature has become a new purpose of the national education system as an addition to the purposes of producing nationalist and conservative individuals (Sayilan, 2006, p.3). Despite the existence of these critiques, there is no study that empirically investigates the new curriculum. Through a comparative analysis of pre- and post-reform curricula for Social Studies representing neoliberal discourse, this is the first study to examine the relationship between economic policies and the discourse of the new curriculum. Our goal in the next section is to provide a descriptive analysis and a critique of the Social Studies curricula published in 1968 and 2004.

### **Curricula: A Comparative Outlook**

The new curriculum is prepared in line with a thematic approach and different than the 1968 curriculum: there are learning spheres, competencies and skills which will be discussed later. It is divided into four main parts: Introduction, social studies sample activities for the fourth grade, social studies sample activities for the fifth grade, and sample forms for assessment. The 1968 curriculum is organized under four major purposes of the social studies course: duties and responsibilities of citizenship, relationship among human beings living in a society, informing students about their environment, country and the world, and teaching students to acquire a decent life.

Compared to the new curriculum, the 1968 curriculum has more emphasis on being a member of the society. Several parts of the 1968 curriculum stress that the primary school education has to teach students the idea that interests of the society come before their own

interests. Additionally, the curriculum states that students learn in the primary school that “in order to attain an individual well-being, first of all the society has to be developed” (MoNE, 1968, p.8). The 2005 curriculum, on the contrary, does not underline the importance of society’s interest. The curriculum first underlines the importance of individual development and then stresses that “education teaches students to live in collaboration” (MoNE, 2004b, p.7). The new curriculum signals the importance of knowledge production and knowledge usage stating that knowledge has become the main factor determining everything in the world. In this respect, the people who produce and use knowledge are superior to everyone else. The new curriculum also focuses on the developments in science and technology. The emphasis on science and technology in the new curriculum indicates the impact of a shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy. Especially in the last decade, knowledge began to be considered as a capital which signals the necessity of making rearrangements in the educational system accordingly with the knowledge economy (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.330). Furthermore, as a result of the shift to knowledge economy the role of education in the creation of human capital becomes more significant (ibid. 332). The *key informant B* stated in the interview that “*like other countries, Turkey has been in transition from an industrial to knowledge society, and this shift had to be represented in the educational system*”. Considering Turkey as a knowledge economy, the MoNE reorganized primary school social studies course with the idea of knowledge production and knowledge usage.

Another difference between the old and new curriculum is the assessment methods. The new curriculum combines classical and alternative methods. In the old curriculum, the main assessment methods were tests and essay questions. However, assessment methods and tools in the new curriculum are: Observation, performance homework, interviews, self-evaluation forms, student folders (portfolio), projects, posters, tests, matching, filling the blanks and essay questions. By increasing the number of assessment methods and tools, the social studies curriculum committee aimed to make the assessment process sensitive to differences among students. However, addition of alternative

assessments is a clear implication of neoliberal ideology on education. Some of these methods address the individual's adaptation abilities to the market rather than his/her multi-faceted development. The most prominent of these alternative methods is "performance homework," since performance has become one of the main reference points of thinking in the neoliberal ideology (Harris, 2007, p.135). In this context, *"a further consequence of marketization of education has been the increased emphasis on performance and accountability assessment, with the accompanying use of performance indicators and personal appraisal systems"* (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p.327).

The new curriculum defines learning sphere (*öğrenme alanı*) as a structure which defines a relationship among skills, concepts and values, and thus organizes the education process (MoNE, 2004b, p.96). In the curriculum, there are eight learning spheres in each grade. The tables below show learning spheres and the units related to the learning spheres. Learning spheres indicate specific emphasis of each unit. For instance, the fourth units of the fourth and fifth grade textbooks are devoted to topics related to production, delivery and consumption. The tables also indicate the class hours devoted to each learning sphere. Table 1 illustrates the percentage of each learning sphere and unit within the curriculum. Table 2 illustrates the total time that would be devoted to each learning sphere and unit. The tables display that there are no great differences between the spheres or units in terms of their percentage within the curriculum or class hour.

**Table 1.** Learning Spheres, Units and Their Class Hours for the 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies Course

| Learning Sphere                              | Units                          | Class Hours |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Individual and Identity                      | Everyone has an identity       | 12          |
| Culture and Heritage                         | I am learning my past          | 15          |
| Human beings: Places and Environment         | Where we live                  | 15          |
| Production, Delivery and Consumption         | From production to consumption | 15          |
| Science, Technology and Society              | Fortunately, there             | 12          |
| Groups, Foundations and Social Organizations | People working for the society | 12          |
| Power, Management and Society                | Human beings and management    | 15          |
| Global Linkages                              | My friends abroad              | 12          |
|                                              | <b>Total</b>                   | <b>108</b>  |

**Table 2.** Learning Spheres, Units and Their Class Hours for the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies Course

| Learning Sphere                              | Units                          | Class Hours |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Individual and Identity                      | I am learning my rights        | 12          |
| Culture and Heritage                         | Step by step Turkey            | 15          |
| Human beings: Places and Environment         | Learning our environment       | 15          |
| Production, Delivery and Consumption         | Our production                 | 15          |
| Science, Technology and Society              | Realized dreams                | 12          |
| Groups, Foundations and Social Organizations | People working for the society | 12          |

|                               |                      |            |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Power, Management and Society | One country one flag | 15         |
| Global Linkages               | All our world        | 12         |
|                               | <b>Total</b>         | <b>108</b> |

There are also fourteen skills in the curriculum that the fourth and fifth grade students are expected to acquire:

1. Critical thinking
2. Creative thinking
3. Communication and empathy
4. Research
5. Problem solving
6. Decision making
7. Science technologies usage
8. Entrepreneurship
9. Correct and efficient usage of Turkish
10. Observation
11. Space perception
12. Time and chronology perception
13. Change and sustainability perception
14. Social participation

In addition to the skills, there are seven intermediate/minor competencies in the curriculum as components of the skills: Disaster education competencies, entrepreneurial competencies, human rights and citizenship competencies, development of career awareness competencies, individual education competencies, psychological counseling and guidance competencies, and health culture competencies.

As explained previously, there is no section in the 1968 curriculum on competencies or skills, which mean that the skills and competencies listed above were added to the social studies curriculum with the 2004 reform. Instead of those skills and competencies, there is an emphasis on the 1968 curriculum on being a good citizen, which is described as a person who lives for his/her country. Among the skills and competencies listed in the new curriculum, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial competencies, and development of career awareness competencies are especially important in terms of signaling the impact of the neoliberal

discourse on education. Many scholars note the entrepreneurial nature of the neoliberal world (Apple, 2001; Harris, 2007; Hursh, 2005; Read, 2009). They argue that the creation of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial culture is one of the most significant and perceived signals of neoliberal policies. Furthermore, educational systems serve neoliberalism through leading students to skills and competencies necessary to be a part of the marketplace. For the new curriculum, student is more than a social individual; he/she is also an “enterprising individual.” It aims to familiarize students with the entrepreneurial culture. To illustrate, the entrepreneurship skill set consists of seven targets: Recognizing occupations and workplaces around them, recognizing well-known and successful entrepreneurs around them, exploring the roles of individuals in the economy as a worker and consumer, realizing the importance of education for their future, acquiring essential economic terms, understanding the difficulties that entrepreneurship faces, presenting innovative ideas and designing new products (MoNE, 2004b, p.48).

There are several examples in the classroom exercises section of the curriculum which illustrate how learning spheres, competencies and skills are practiced. Some of the exercises refer to entrepreneurship. To illustrate, the fourth unit of the fifth grade social studies course is named Our Production (*Ürettiklerimiz*) and consists of six exercises. One of the exercises is “Map of life” (*Hayat haritası*). This exercise begins by asking students whether there are entrepreneurs around them. Teachers are expected to introduce to the class one of the well-known entrepreneurs of Turkey, and give examples from the business life of this person. At the end of the exercise, students are also asked to introduce one of the entrepreneurs around them or in Turkey (ibid. p.371). Another example is the exercise called “I Make, I Sell” (*Yapıyorum, satıyorum*). In this exercise, students are asked to design a product and prepare a project illustrating how they will market the product. The curriculum says that while preparing the project, students will go through all of the marketing steps: Packaging the product, selling and preparing the advertising campaign. Then, these projects will be presented in the classroom. This sample exercise also writes that “While presenting their projects, students will be told to market their product *through considering their classmates as their customers*” [emphasis added] (ibid. p.372).

Furthermore, the end of the exercise instructs that these products can be sold, and the income can be used for classroom or school necessities.

These exercises have several crucial implications. First, they show that supermarket, production, selling, marketing, entrepreneurship, advertising and shopping enter into schools. Second, they indicate that the new curriculum leads students to be active actors of the market place. Students are taught how to design, produce, advertise and sell a product. It is important to note that the curriculum directs the classmates to be considered as costumers. The classmate relationship turns into a seller-customer relationship and encourages students to put the exercise into practice in real life through selling their products for money.

Therefore, this article contends that neoliberal discourse is heavily integrated into the renewed curriculum and students have become to be regarded as human capitals that will be defined according to market rules and work for the continuity of the market. In other words, 2004 reform made the capitalist messages in the curriculum explicit.

## **Conclusion**

Educational policies have been in the process of transformation during the neoliberal years of the last three decades. In the first part of the neoliberal reform agenda, marketization of educational services was at the top. With the introduction of the new wave of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, the emphasis of reforms have been enlarged towards the inclusion of “reforms” in all aspects of the education sphere including the curriculum, teaching and governance. In this sense, the global agenda of the neoliberal strategy aimed at transforming both the financing and the teaching aspects of education in order to create a standardized educational sphere all over the world. The curriculum reforms implemented in the different corners of the world were not an exception. In the last decade, from Bolivia to Romania, a new standardized, market-friendly curriculum has been introduced and the agenda of the capitalist classes to harmonize the content of education with the “necessities” of the market gained strength.

Turkey has not been an exception in this transformation process. The aim of this article hence has been to illuminate the curriculum aspect of

the neoliberal “harmonization” process. Following the general picture of the transformation in education and focusing on the different factors affecting the neoliberalization process in Turkey, this article has put an emphasis on which concepts and practices specific to the neoliberal ideology were constructed in which ways in the 2004 curriculum reform which provided a new but controversial basis for Turkish educational system in terms of the constructivist educational approach. Drawing on analysis of the previous and renewed curricula, and the in-depth interview data, the article has manifested that the 2004 curriculum reform in Turkey in fact was part of a pedagogical reform wave which has been simultaneously implemented in many developing countries throughout the world. The discourse in education, however, should not be a tool solidifying neoliberal ideology (Robertson, 2005), and critical educators should take up the struggle against “neoliberalization” of all aspects of education.

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper submitted to the **XIV World Congress of Comparative Education Societies**, Istanbul 2010, 14-18 June, Boğaziçi University.

<sup>2</sup> The AKP defines itself as a neoliberal and neoconservative party. This paper, however, mostly underlines its neoliberal character as this constitutes the Party’s dominant approach in the 2004 reform. Neoconservative character of the Party has been explicitly introduced to the education system with the twelve-year compulsory education reform initiated in 2012-2013 academic year (also known as, 4+4+4 Education System). This reform has aimed to undo the effects of the 1997 reform by allowing the reopening of *Imam Hatip* middle schools (i.e., religious vocational middle schools) and by introducing a number of religious elective courses.

<sup>3</sup> The committee is composed of nineteen members: director of the committee (1), history experts (3), geography expert (1), program development specialist (1), assessment specialist (1), and teachers (12). The interviews were conducted with five members of the committee.

<sup>4</sup> The AKP governments initiated another major educational reform in 2012-2013 academic year with the introduction of a twelve-year compulsory education system (also known as, 4+4+4 Education System). This amendment replaced the education system that had consisted of eight-year compulsory education with a new system consisting of twelve-year compulsory education which is divided into three levels: four-year first level primary education, four-year second level primary education and four-year secondary education. A number of elective courses have been introduced into the education system with this amendment. However, the content of primary school curricula that were reorganized with the 2004 reform has remained the same (MoNE 2012).

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