Comparing teachers' views on morality and moral education, a comparative study in Turkey and the United States

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the researchers examined how K-8 teachers approach morality, moral education, and the moral development of children in Turkey and in the United States. Both countries have diverse cultures and long histories with secular education systems. Surveys were sent to teachers in nine cities in both countries. Results suggest that Turkish teachers emphasized societal values and global values, which have implications for the sustainability of the Turkish nation-state. American teachers emphasized moral action and morality in context (cultural relativity) rather than global values. Our findings emphasize the importance of inter-cultural awareness and tolerance.

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1. Introduction

In this study, researchers examined how elementary school teachers in Turkey and the United States defined morality, taught moral lessons, and encouraged moral development in children. An important goal was to determine how teachers viewed morality so both groups could better understand how people in diverse cultures approached moral challenges. Researchers emphasized the commonalities that people from diverse cultures shared in their beliefs and attitudes toward morality. By asking teachers to answer both open-ended qualitative questions and Likert style questions, we compared the perspectives of teachers in Turkey with teachers in the West Coast State of California in the USA.

Our research was originally motivated by our interest in better understanding how our two countries, with such disparate cultures, and religious and historical backgrounds, have been able to maintain democratic-style governments and secular education systems. And, how the two countries with such different cultures and traditions teach children to be moral and ethical in a way that sustains these values over time. Ultimately, if we seek to sustain a peaceful co-existence with other countries, we need to nurture connection through understanding and knowledge.

2. Contexts of the study and literature review

Most people agree that schooling is not only a means for the acquisition of scientific knowledge and life skills such as problem-solving and critical thinking, but, it is also, to some extent, responsible for the moral education of students. In the literature, teachers have been depicted as significant contributors to the moral development of their students (Revell & Arthur, 2007; Schuitema, ten Dam, & Veugelers, 2007). In their research, Schuitema et al. (2007) found that most studies on morality in education focused on moral education, and more specifically, problem-based approaches, the socratic method, problem-solving and critical thinking skills, while other studies focus on drama and service learning. In a recent study in China, researchers' studied music as a way to promote morality in the classroom (Ho, 2010). Moral education is often connected to specific content and taught through case studies regarding specific people (e.g., Martin Luther King), or a historical event (genocide). Due to this widespread belief, moral education has become an unavoidable part of the school experience (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2005).

Many people believe that an important aim of education is to socialize the young (Ornstein & Levine, 2008). According to Durkheim and Dewey, education needs to have a moral agenda for the sake of social cohesion. They believe that profound changes within the society need to be addressed through schools, and schools need to be contextualized for the larger forces behind these changes, indicating that morality itself is a social endeavor (Dill, 2007). Purpel and Ryan (1976) suggested that in K-12 schools "moral education goes with the territory." Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1998) observed classrooms in the United States to better understand whether, and how, morality was integrated into the curriculum. They demonstrated that classrooms are places where the moral development of students is richly woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Fewer studies examine how teachers view themselves in relation to moral development. A study in the US examined 180 public school teachers' understanding of themselves as moral agents, which included a description of their moral selves and their decisions and behaviors as moral educators (Joseph & Efron, 1993). The authors found that teachers perceived their role not only as teaching subject matter, but also included teaching moral values. They found especially that teachers' individual moralities shape the choices they make in their classrooms.

In another example, Sockett and LePage (2002), explored teachers' use of moral language over time. They analyzed products developed by practicing teachers from a nontraditional Master's program (exit portfolios, papers, reflective essays, and admission essays). Results suggest that the teachers often described their work in technical terms when they first started the program (except when they were explaining why they became teachers). Later in the program, they were encouraged to envision classrooms as moral rather than technical arenas. By the end of the program, they used moral vocabulary consistently to describe their work.

2.1. Turkey

To understand the responses of Turkish and American teachers, it is necessary to give a brief description of the history of these two countries' approach to moral education within their historical and cultural contexts. Turkey was transformed into a modern democratic nation-state seeking social cohesion and solidarity through education with the foundation of the Republic after 1923 (Kaya, 1984). At that time, the aim of education was to teach basic knowledge and instill social values in the young (Akyuz, 2001). In line with the Ministry of Education's core programs, the Turkish Constitution suggests that the ultimate aim of education is the development of generations of Turkish citizens who respect secular, democratic and national values. Factors that define education principles are listed as 1) Education shall be national; 2) Education shall be republican; 3) Education shall be secular; 4) Education shall have a scientific foundation; 5) Education shall incorporate generality and equality; and 6) Education shall be functional and modern (National Education Law number 1739). Thus, education promotes ideal citizens in the Turkish educational policy, which exerts Plato's "virtuous citizen" (Keyman & Icduygu, 1998).

Therefore one aim of education in Turkey is to maintain strong democratic values, and the essential foundation of democracy is most fundamentally based on equality that addresses commitment to collective solidarity (Salmoni, 2004).

Through an in-depth examination of how democracy and pedagogy were woven into the schooling system in several countries such as France, Germany, Britain, and the United States, a former teacher and an educational policy-maker in the Central Education Ministry in the late 1920s and through the 1930s, Hilmi Ziya Ülken, wrote articles that spelled out a democratic form of government that rejected both social stratification and a socio-political role for religion. Rather, the articles guaranteed legal equality, secularism, and the rational pursuit of common interests through active commitment to state- and society-oriented service (İsmail Hakkı, cited from Salmoni, 2004, p. 87). According to İsmail Hakkı, a policy-maker of Ülken's period, ethics of a democratic republic should be completely positivistic and worldly which eliminates religion from the sphere of morality (cited in Salmoni, 2004). This highlights a socio-political concern especially after the establishment of a new Republic that secured a national sovereignty from imperialistic powers and the displaced the Ottoman Dynasty (Salmoni, 2004).

Despite all critiques, the military has become guardians of the secular republic. After a coupe d'tat in Turkey in the 1980's due to unstable civic movements and leftist upheavals by university students, the military regime encouraged the introduction of a "Religious Culture and Moral Education Course" as compulsory in the elementary and secondary schools. The President of the time, Kenan Evren, who was formerly from the military, spoke out that it was the lack of compulsory moral and religious education that led the nation-state into a chaotic situation (Uncular, 1987). Moral education, including religious culture, became part of the formative curriculum in Turkey and has been much an issue of debate since that period by assertive secularists who underscore the importance of separation between state and religion (Kuru, 2009). The debate about whether and how to teach moral values, and whether to use religion as a base for this education has been argued in other countries as well (Tan, 2008).

Despite the changes referred to above, research indicates that primary school curriculum requires schools to develop the values and attitudes that promote respect for human rights and to build a culture of peace for the sustainability of a secular and democratic society. Teachers and parents in Turkey have maintained those values over time (Engin-Demir & Paykoc, 2006). Other research supports this idea. For instance, according to the European values research, 83% of Turkish people think that respect for human rights is not sufficient in Turkey (Esmer, 2002). Most would agree there has been an increase of individualization in modern western societies (Schuitema et al., 2007). Similarly, value orientations of Turkish youth in 1989 underwent major changes toward a more competitive and individualistic orientation in 1992 and 1995, indicating that values are being modified to fit the changes that the society was experiencing (Cileli, 2000).

2.2. The United States

The United States of America is also a democratic country with a separation between religion and state. The population is pluralistic in its ethnic origins, with a higher percentage of people descended from Western European countries, although this trend has begun shifting due to changing demographics within the immigrant population. Now there are more immigrants of Hispanic origin entering the US. The US is also home to a number of religions with Christianity and Judaism representing the two largest segments. Like Turkey, the teachers in the US help the United States maintain democracy and perpetuate certain moral values, such as tolerance for difference and equality.

Various US researchers have provided insight into the moral dimensions of teaching. In their book, LePage and Sockett (2002) explained that moral development in the US is often misunderstood because people have different opinions on what it means to be moral. Some believe morality is tied directly to religious beliefs, and others believe morality is not dependent on religion. Some believe that to express a moral viewpoint is merely to express an