‘No-one respects them anyway’: secondary school students’ perceptions of human rights education in Turkey

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The incorporation of compulsory courses on human rights into the secondary school curriculum in 1998 has been an important first step in developing respect for human rights and responsibilities among the younger generation in Turkey. Yet, these courses have many shortcomings in terms of materials, pedagogy and teacher attitudes. This paper explores Grades 7 and 8 (ages 13 and 14) students’ experiences in Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses on the basis of qualitative data collected through focus group discussions in Ankara and Istanbul in the 2006–2007 academic year. The responses of the students indicate that these courses have had little impact in empowering students or in facilitating them to consider their own or others’ human rights as an integral part of their lives. Rather, the students perceive the national and the global arena as characterized by mass human rights violations against which they feel powerless. The paper draws attention to the importance of a revised human rights education for students along with a global focus and appropriate methodology.

**Keywords:** human rights education; education in Turkey; textbooks

**Introduction**
For the last two decades, there has been growing international consensus on the importance of human rights education (HRE) for building a rights-based society (Osler and Starkey 1996; Andreopoulos and Claude 1997). The proclamation of the years 1995–2004 as the United Nation Decade for Human Rights Education has been a catalyst for the introduction of HRE in many national contexts. Turkey established its National Committee on the Decade for Human Rights Education in 1998 and formulated a National Programme on HRE (National Committee on the Decade for Human Rights Education 1999). Within this framework, a great number of civil servants have received HRE training. The statistics presented in official reports are impressive, but the reality much less so: training involved one- or two-day information seminars focused mostly on recent legal amendments.

A more striking development in the field of HRE was the introduction of compulsory Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses in Grades 7 and 8 (ages 13 and 14) in 1998 and an elective Democracy and Human Rights course in Grade 10. The incorporation of human rights themes into education was an important step for the institutionalization of HRE in Turkey. Nevertheless, these courses have had many...
problems. An important one relates to their teachers. The courses have been taught by social studies teachers who themselves have not been educated in human rights. A second, separate yet related problem, was the implementation of HRE without an appropriate interactive pedagogic methodology. Textbooks were also insufficient in providing adequate activity-based materials to teachers. Moreover, these courses were part of a general curriculum that was imbued with chauvinistic nationalist and militarist prescriptions (Ceylan and Irzık 2004).

The Ministry of National Education, as part of the curriculum reform launched in 2005, decided to abolish these distinct Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses and render human rights themes as a cross-curricular subject. This reform involves the redesigning of the whole curriculum along the lines of a ‘student-centred approach’ and the introduction of new textbooks (as stated by the Ministry of National Education, MoNE 2007). By the 2008–2009 academic year, all subjects in Grades 1–8 (the years of compulsory education) have begun to be taught with new textbooks. Following this reform, human rights themes are taught in other courses such as social studies, Turkish or life studies. In rationalizing its decision to abolish HRE courses, the Ministry cited other national examples where HRE is usually taught as a cross-curricular subject.

This paper investigates the experiences of students in Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses before their abolition and incorporation within the general curriculum. Assessment of the impact of these courses is important for any future debate upon the efficacy of the revised curriculum. These courses have been studied in terms of their curricula, textbooks and teachers’ points of views (Gök 2003; Kepenekçi 2005; Çayır 2007; Çayır and Gürkaynak 2008), yet they have not been evaluated through the eyes of students. With this aim, the paper first contextualizes the political history of distinct HRE courses in Turkey, and then briefly examines the content of these courses. Most importantly, it concludes by discussing the findings based on a qualitative data collected through focus group discussions.

The incorporation of human rights education in a ‘non-Western’ context
Contemporary Turkey is characterized by two opposing tendencies regarding its human rights situation. In the first case, there are serious deficiencies in the equal social inclusion of its diverse ethnic groups. Gender relations are often characterized by female subordination. The privileged position of the military in the constitution means that its long history of violence inflicted upon parts of the population, whether officially sanctioned or secretly organized, has seldom been properly investigated or controlled. The Turkish population itself is a legacy of the multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman Empire. As the initial report under the Convention on the Rights of the Child notes, Turkey is ‘a European, Balkan, Caucasian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Black Sea State all at once’ (Tomasevski 2002). Despite this diversity, the Turkish Republic has been characterized by a strong-state tradition, a policy of national developmentalism and the State’s organic vision of society (Keyman and Içduygū 2005). Turkish citizenship has privileged a republican model over a liberal one, which puts an emphasis on the unity and indivisibility of the nation along with the non-recognition of language and ethnic differences. This perspective is still manifested in an influential section of the civil and military bureaucracies who have taken a hostile stance towards human rights law and activism. A relatively recent study, for instance, reveals that 51% of the judges and prosecutors think ‘human rights can constitute a threat to the security of the state’ (Sancar 2007, 14).
On the other hand, Turkey has been an official candidate for membership to the European Union since 1999 and started accession negotiations in 2005. In the process, Turkey has implemented several key reforms in order to bring its administrative and legal structure into conformity with international human rights agreements and the standards set by the European Union (Kabasakal Arat 2007). All government cabinets since then for instance have included a minister of state in charge of human rights issues, and various administrative and consultative bodies have been formed in order to protect and improve human rights standards. As mentioned above, the formation of a National Committee on the Decade for Human Rights Education has been in itself an important development for fostering HRE at the national level. For the last 10 years new human rights centres and graduate programmes have been established in universities. NGOs have begun to publish innovative alternative citizenship textbooks (Gürkaynak et al. 1998, 2002) and to conduct successful HRE programmes (Ilkkaracan and Amado 2005). The introduction of Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses into the formal curriculum was another outstanding development in the field of HRE.

In the face of these two contrasting tendencies in Turkey, Tomasevski, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education in Turkey, notes how she was ‘surprised by the cleavage between the enhancement of human rights education on the one hand, and restrictions on applied human rights education, targeted at tackling human rights problems in Turkey’ (2002). This cleavage derives mainly from the modernization history of Turkey that involves an aspiration both to modernize the new Turkish republic and its population through westernizing reforms and to create a new distinct nationalistic Turkish identity. The ambition is somewhat paradoxical in the face of Turkey’s ambivalent attitude towards the West. ‘The West’ has simultaneously been coded as ‘a model’ to be followed and considered as a threat to ‘indigenous’ national values and interests since the foundation of the Republic in 1923 (Kadıoğlu 1996; Ahıska 2003). Therefore, the European Union membership process and the incorporation of ‘Western-related’ concepts such as human rights can easily be interpreted and opposed as a threat to national unity and state security, as seen in the judges’ and prosecutors’ stances mentioned above.

What also surprises some people about Turkey, including the Special Rapporteur, is its capacity for quick adoption of various forms of modernity. Turkey is often analysed by both domestic and foreign observers within an evolutionary historical understanding, which focuses on its lack of modernity and therefore its deficiencies regarding the claimed gender equality, urbanization or human rights of modernity. However, it is this very stigmatization that Turkey has lagged behind Western civilization and the Turkish political elite’s internalized appropriation of it that leads to a hasty or rapid appropriation of forms of modernity. It may even lead to the appearance of what Nilufer Göle calls ‘extra-forms of modernity’. Göle (2002, 184) notes that:

Modern social imaginaries cross boundaries and circulate but take a different twist and a slightly modified accent in non-Western contexts – they take on a sense of extra. We can read extra both as external to the West and as additional and unordinary. The evolutionary concept of historical change can hardly imagine that there can be a surplus or excess of modernity in some domains of social life in non-Western contexts. (Emphasis in original)

According to Göle, modernity in non-Western contexts such as Turkey ‘functions as a fetish’, because ‘modernity’s manifestations are overemphasized’ (2002, 184) and rapidly adopted since they are registered as part of belonging to modernity. What
facilitates the adoption of various social, political or cultural forms of modernity is that they are often appropriated not as a solution to present (social, cultural or gender-related) problems but as a requirement of civilization. In other words, Turkey’s century-old ambition to modernize herself in order to catch up with the civilized world (read the West), as modernizers put it, leads Turkey to quickly adopt several forms of modernity, even before some Western countries. In this line of analysis, for instance, it is not surprising for Turkey to have had a female prime minister in 1994 (before the USA or some European countries, despite its gender-related problems).

Çayır (2009) has argued elsewhere that the incorporation of distinct Human Rights Education courses in Turkey’s formal education system might also be explained within the framework of the notion of extra-modernity. From a historical perspective it may seem contradictory for Turkey to have compulsory and distinct Human Rights Education courses in the face of some influential official groups’ resistance to human rights discourse and ongoing serious human rights violations. However, since human rights discourse is today considered a ‘prerequisite for modern civilization’ at the global level, it is Turkey that has formed its National Committee on HRE and included distinct courses into its curricula, while many Western countries do not yet have separate courses on this theme.

The content of human rights education courses
The construction of this twofold discourse on Western modernity/civilization and on human rights, as both desired and feared, also informs the curricula and textbooks of HRE courses. In Turkey’s highly centralized education system, the Board of Education prepares the curricula for all subjects and its approval is required for the adoption of a textbook in formal education. Textbooks are often written by former teachers or educational foundations and publishing companies for accreditation by the Board. The Board of Education announced in 1998 that the previously titled ‘Civics’ course would be renamed ‘Citizenship and Human Rights Education’ to be taught in the seventh and eighth grades as compulsory courses for one hour a week. The outlines of these two courses reflect a clear ‘division of labour’ based on a twofold discourse on human rights and national unity and security. This suggests that while the outline of the seventh grade course provides textbook authors with the opportunity to present a universalist conception of human rights, the eighth grade curriculum puts an emphasis on a duty-based citizenship and exclusionary notion of patriotism.

The outline of the seventh grade course that focuses more on human rights themes is as follows: (1) the common heritage of humanity, (2) the development of the notion of human rights, (3) ethics and human rights, and (4) basic rights and freedoms. Under these headings, textbook authors provided subtitles that involved various key subjects such as the concept of being human, the concept of rights, the history of human rights, ethical foundations of human rights, the role of the state in the implementations of human rights and the like. And all textbooks included a simplified translation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child as appendix. Although some authors’ presentation of human rights was problematic, there were also successfully written textbooks by human rights experts (Çayır 2007; Çayır and Gürkaynak 2008).

The eighth grade course’s programme, on the other hand, focused more on citizenship and national security issues. The outline of this course is as follows: (1) basic
concepts of state, citizenship, citizenship rights and responsibilities; (2) the protection of human rights; (3) the elements of national security and national power; and (4) basic problems concerning the protection of human rights. In particular, the first and third headings and contents of this programme were problematic since each portrayed a Turkey eternally under foreign siege. The textbook published by the Ministry of National Education, for instance, described Turkey as ‘always under threat because of its geographical situation’ and thus declared ‘criticising state policies and state officials’ to be strategies adopted by ‘terrorists and separatists’ (Bilgen et al. 2001, 81). Moreover, the eighth grade textbooks promoted a notion of citizenship on the basis of ‘performing military service’, creating ‘the mindset that citizens should not allow activities of divisive and destructive nature’ and ‘glorifying death’ for the sake of nation (Ceylan and Irzik 2004).

Despite the fact that textbooks play an important role in teaching and learning, we cannot assume that the above contents of the HRE courses are taught by teachers and learnt by students in an unmediated fashion. Research shows that neither teachers nor students are passive recipients of knowledge. Rather, as Apple and Christian-Smith (1991, 51) point out:

> Teachers have a long history of mediating and transforming text material when they employ it in classrooms. Students bring their own classed, raced, gendered, and sexual biographies with them as well. They, too, selectively interpret, and reject what counts as legitimate knowledge. As critical ethnographies of schools have shown, students (and teachers) are not empty vessels into which knowledge is poured. Rather than participants in what Freire has called ‘banking’ education, students are active constructors of the meaning of the education they encounter.

This perspective draws attention to the inevitable agency of teachers and students who cannot be thought of as living in a political and cultural vacuum. Teachers and students, regardless of their ages, are members of social groups, actively imbibing socially appropriate attitudes and political convictions, which act as a framework through which they read the text presented to them. Therefore, it is crucial to study students’ perceptions and their ways of reckoning with HRE in order to assess the efficacy of this education.

**Students and methodology**

We conducted 14 focus group sessions during the 2006–2007 academic year in Ankara (10 groups) and Istanbul (three groups) to explore students’ experiences and perceptions of Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses. Each group included 5–10 pupils and in total we worked with 80 students, of roughly equal gender composition. Pupils were aged from 13 to 14 (seventh and eighth grades) and studying in state schools situated in middle and upper-middle class neighbourhoods. Discussions were held in an empty classroom at each school in the presence of only the facilitator and the students. No school personnel was present. Pupils were invited by their teachers whom we asked to compose a heterogeneous group on the basis of gender and academic success. All discussions lasted approximately 50 minutes and all were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed using open and axial coding (Corbin and Strauss 2007). By means of open coding, we looked across the transcripts for identical or similar statements and comments. Following this initial coding process, each transcript was re-read and closely related concepts are combined to form
categories. These categories were connected to one another through axial coding (Pandit 1996). Thus, each determined category was set in relation to one another in order to make sense of the data.

Students were told before the discussion that we wanted to talk and hear about their views and experiences of Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses. Students were also assured that their responses would be anonymous and would not, therefore, affect their relationships with their teachers and schools. Yet a great many of the students in groups were suspicious and preferred to keep silent during the few initial questions. In many groups, we needed to repeat our intentions and promises of anonymity. However, after discussion warmed up, pupils were very eager to share their views on the courses. It appeared motivating for pupils to talk to somebody who was interested and listening to their experiences. As one female student said, while voluntarily expressing why she enjoyed the discussion, ‘for the first time somebody asked these questions [about a course] to us’.

We began each discussion with a broad and open-ended question of ‘how would they describe this course to a junior student who is going to take this course next year?’ The remaining questions were also designed in an open-ended fashion and aimed at exploring students’ perceptions on the following topics: what they feel and think about the Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses and its textbook; what they think they have learned in this course; what a typical lesson is like; what kind of methodology the teacher employs; what they think of the outcomes of taking this course.

Pupils’ self-categorizations of the citizenship and human rights education course and textbook

In our preliminary discussions, the students unanimously said that they called the course ‘Citizenship’ among themselves. In response to our question of how they would describe and characterize this Citizenship course, the pupils made use of a common terminology based on the following four dimensions: important-unimportant, easy-difficult, enjoyable-boring and necessary-unnecessary.

Focus group discussions demonstrated that the course was considered not as ‘important’ as maths, science, Turkish and social studies courses by students. The students identified these latter four as their basic courses. The main reason for this is that students are examined on combinations of these four courses during their high school entrance exam. In Turkey, it is very difficult to find a place in ‘good-quality’ high schools and thus competition is extremely fierce. This forces middle-class families to send their children to private coaching courses on the weekend for extra lessons and practice exams in these four courses. This automatically makes ‘the Citizenship’ course not important in students’ eyes. Students sometimes implied and sometimes openly expressed that their teachers also did not put much emphasis on this course. They said that when they were behind the curriculum in social studies course, their teachers preferred to teach social studies rather than ‘Citizenship’. This narrative resonates with the fact that this course is taught by social studies teachers who had no training in HRE and considered themselves incompetent regarding its content and methodology (Kepenekci 2005). A second point why pupils found the course not important is related to its duration, one hour (40 minutes) a week. They compared this course with others (such as maths, four hours a week) and tended to think that a course that is just one hour could not be very important.
The other axis to which students referred when evaluating this course was easy-difficult. Few students in groups invoked the term ‘difficult’ regarding the course. Rather, they stated that they considered it ‘easy’ since it ‘is usually based on a comment’. Asked what is meant by ‘comment’, a student explained that ‘we do not do numerical operations as in maths. We understand it by reading’. However, reading the book was ‘boring’ for the students. ‘Boring’ was the third common term emerged from students about the course in our discussions. One reason for this was the textbook. Students said that:

The book is very detailed. It involves the articles of the Constitution. It is informative but very detailed. I think it contains many details that are not necessary. Constitutional articles for example … I mean the Article 26, the Article 52 … Are these things necessary in a Grade 7 book?

I think we all have problems with the book. There is a title for instance about Children’s rights. Then there is a subtitle under this title. It narrates the same things in another format. It mentions the same things all the time. This is so boring for us.

There are no concrete examples. If they had been, I think we could have kept it [the textbook knowledge] more in our minds.

It [the textbook] does not employ a simple language. It is written in a way that we cannot understand.

The textbook is written as if it narrates to a parliamentarian. As if we were teachers or professors ourselves, I mean they present the information as such ….

A majority of teachers (67.6%) also reported in a study that the textbooks of Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses were insufficient and did not match the level of students (Kepenekci 2005, 58). Nevertheless, what teachers in general do in the class, the students in our discussions noted, is to use the textbook as virtually the sole material in the classroom. A typical course hour was depicted by the majority of the students as follows: ‘the teacher comes into the classroom and asks a student to read a particular section of the book. Then she or he asks a couple of students to tell the class what they understood from the passage just read. Following this, the teacher explains or comments on the passage’. The students expressed that they found this type of reading very boring.

However, in a few groups the students said that their teacher sometimes employed role playing or drama which they liked very much. In general, they stated that they enjoyed the course when (1) there is an opportunity to talk and discuss, (2) daily events were included in the discussion, (3) they could draw examples from their own lives, and (4) the teacher brings into the classroom printed or visual materials. This finding brings to the fore the importance of appropriate interactive methodologies for an effective Citizenship and Human Rights Education. The Ministry of National Education’s ongoing curriculum reform aims to introduce new ‘student-centred’ teaching materials. These new textbooks that will also involve human rights themes need to be analysed in terms of their methodologies. However, one obvious fact in Turkey is that most of the teachers are not familiar with these interactive pedagogical techniques and the Ministry’s performance is very poor for both pre-service and in-service teacher training. Traditional teacher-centred techniques make HRE remain at a cognitive level. Thus HRE cannot achieve attitudinal and behavioural transformations, an aim that could be achieved by interactive techniques.
One last opinion that students expressed in invoking the terms ‘unnecessary’ and ‘boring’ about the course was their contention that ‘they already know their rights’. This deserves more attention since the statement ‘we already know our rights’ was one of the most common responses emerging from our discussions. This response might illuminate the key problems of the course and teacher attitudes, and give some hints for further policy-making about HRE.

 Sterile presentation of human rights: ‘we already know our rights!’

Asked what the students think they have learned on and about human rights in the course, the most cited rights were as follows in students’ own wording:

The police could not enter a house without permission. Even a prime minister could not …

No one can enter and search our house without permission.

For instance if we were a celebrity we have a right to privacy … (for instance if someone broadcast our private life in a newspaper, we can sue him/her)

We have the right to petition, they need to reply to our petition in a certain time span.

I did not know the rights of children and I could learn more or less what children’s rights are.

There is a right to health in children’s rights … the child has a right to health even if he or she has no money.

The right to life …

These responses show that the students, not surprisingly, named the rights relating to their own daily lives and translated them into their own language. In this sense, HRE in Turkish case could be interpreted as operating in what Tibbitts (2002) calls an ‘awareness model’, achieving a ‘cognitive awareness’ to a certain degree in students. Tibbitts (2002) classifies the HRE practice in the field into three different categories: ‘values and awareness model’, ‘accountability model’ and ‘transformative model’. These models are differentiated from each other based on their target audience and aims. A common audience of the accountability model is lawyers, civil servants or medical professionals who need to take a special care to protect the rights of people for whom they have responsibility. The transformative model aims at personal empowerment leading towards activism for social change. HRE in formal education, for Tibbitts, falls within the awareness model which focuses more on the content knowledge. This is because, as she rightly points out, ‘[U]nless an HRE program organized for the general public or in schools has extended contact hours, sequenced learning experiences and a developmentally appropriate design intended to affect attitudes and skills, it is unlikely that the program will affect the learner beyond content knowledge’ (2002, 164). This suggests that today HRE in formal curriculum is taught within the broader context of a national(istic) educational systems and it is difficult in many contexts to take a critical stance to current nation-state policies in order to empower and lead students to social action.

Adopting a transformative model is particularly difficult in the Turkish case where education is carried out within a single curriculum with its emphasis on exclusive
nationalism and an organic social order and by teachers who are not equipped with the necessary HRE skills. It is, therefore, not easy to achieve a transformation and develop skills for social action in formal education. However, the curriculum (especially seventh grade) involves much information about key human rights documents and mechanisms. Despite students’ negative description of the course as ‘boring’ or ‘unimportant’, their responses demonstrated their ability to name some of the rights, showing that the course and its content led to awareness in students. However, a sense of awareness does not tell us about the nature of further possible social action. In other words, we should probe more the notion of awareness: awareness, but for what?

The most common response we received in all groups was students’ reaction that ‘they already know their rights’. Their negative attitudes about the course mainly derive from their feelings that the course was redundant:

When we read about human rights [in this course] we learn things that everybody knows.

In daily life people more or less already know their rights.

I think this course is not necessary because I already know what my rights are. I am being taught in my family.

Not hurting a person, not being hurt by a person. These are already known by everyone.

We already know the topics in human rights textbook. Did we not know the right to life when there was no such course? Of course we knew it.

These statements reveal many problems regarding the organization of HRE in formal education. The main problem involves the inadequacy of both the methodology employed by teachers and the information presented by textbooks in linking human rights to students’ daily lives. Students’ ability to name rights such as ‘no one can enter our house’ suggests that they learn rights when they can relate them to daily problems. However, the response that ‘we already know our rights’ demonstrates that human rights are to a great extent presented in a sterile way, abstracted from their daily experiences. Teachers who usually make students read the textbook in the classroom and then comment on them address human rights in an abstract and non-problematic fashion. When teachers repeat that ‘we have a right to life’, students’ response is clearly ‘of course we have a right to life’, followed by ‘we already know this’.

It should be acknowledged that it is not easy for teachers to leave the shelter of safe ‘official knowledge’ and invoke pressing political problems in Turkish politics in formal education, not only in Turkey but also in all national contexts. However, no matter whether educationalists pretend to act that they present an objective knowledge and treat students as non-political objects, students are political subjects who have sources of socialization other (and usually more powerful) than the school.

Pupils as political subjects: ‘the real life is outside [the school]’

One important criticism raised by the students against textbooks was that ‘the textbooks see us as childish’ or ‘they think we are a child’. This is followed by their contention that ‘the real life is outside [the school]’ and that the textbook ‘does not know the realities’. One student responded ‘they should write all the realities of the
world in the book, not simple things’. What they mean by realities seems to be certain events about internal and external politics which, as expressed by themselves, they have learned from the media. The most common reference about ‘world realities’ was events relating to the USA:

For instance, the United State’s occupying of Iraq. Disrespect for human rights. We see this on TV.

Events happening in the United States. Their humiliation of black people, making blacks their slaves … I think the books should include these. They should tell us in the classroom what is wrong and what is right.

They abandoned the blacks after Katrina hurricane … They did not help them.

Some students also mentioned Iran on women’s oppression and racist yelling against black footballers in stadiums in Europe. These remarks demonstrate the important role the media play in the socialization of children vis-à-vis their construction of a relationship to the global world. Students’ responses show that they already have and can easily acquire information on global issues and develop attitudes towards them. This fact indicates the importance of developing new strategies to include the processes of globalization in education. This requires transcending narrow-minded national citizenship or ‘sterile’ human rights education. It could be what Osler and Vincent call a global education, which ‘encompasses the strategies, policies and plans that prepare young people and adults for living together in an interdependent world. It is based on the principles of co-operation, non-violence, respect for human rights and cultural diversity, democracy and tolerance’ (2002, 2). Such an education might address global inequalities and social justice, and equip pupils with skills in linking local, national and global issues to act for a better future. Moreover, as the role of the media in the reception of global issues expressed by students in our discussions shows, global education also requires the inclusion of a perspective focusing on critical media literacy skills.

In addition to ‘the world’s realities’, the students remarked on what they call the ‘realities’ of Turkey including ‘bribery in police and courts’, ‘honour killings’, ‘pickpocketing and purse-snatching’ and ‘terror in eastern Turkey’. Asked how they knew about these problems, they again replied they had either seen on TV or heard about it in the family. The students had an extremely negative image of what was going on around them and in the country:

Turkish people love to violate rules. They oppose the rules. They avoid completing military service or they kill people.

They [some Turks] kill people. They should be put in jail according to rules. They are arrested but released in two days, why? I am really surprised about that.

For instance, people have a right to security. It is forbidden to beat citizens. But this is not obeyed in our country.

It is not important at this point whether these comments are true or not. What is significant is that the students develop their attitudes towards human rights based on these images. The Citizenship and Human Rights Education course might have led to some conceptual awareness about human rights, as we argued above. However, this
awareness does not turn into fostering attitudes and skills to cope with the problems surrounding students in line with HRE. Rather, their belief or observation that human rights are not obeyed led them to perceive the world as merciless, violent and competitive. And their attitudes towards human rights were shaped on this perception:

Many people around us are not observing human rights. Since there are such people, our compliance with [human rights] might cause us to be oppressed.

[my friends] think what would it matter if I observe the rules, as no-one else is following them?

Eventually I should know my rights in daily life when I grow older. In order not to be crushed

What is more worrying is that their perception of a world in which ‘nobody respects human rights’ was complemented with their feeling of being disempowered:

I think they [teachers] teach us many things. Learning about ethics is important, I think … There is a bad ethics in our country perhaps, but we don’t have a chance to change it at the moment. If they gave a chance to us, this course [citizenship] would be more productive.

In this human rights course, on certain topics teachers say ‘your thoughts are always important since you are a member of the society’. But I think our thoughts are not valued.

These responses point to the students’ self-perception of their lack of agency in the face of problems surrounding them. This is very crucial for the future of democracy in Turkey since the feeling of powerlessness and a lack of agency in any society ‘provide a space for authoritarian movements’ (Osler and Starkey 2005, 30). What students said points to the fact that there is a great urgency for youth to be empowered and encouraged to act on their rights. They are waiting to be heard and to act as subjects.

Conclusion

Democratic society is viable not only through its legal and political structures but also because its citizens know and act on their rights and responsibilities. Turkey’s incorporation of distinct Citizenship and Human Rights Education courses in formal curriculum a decade ago (1998–2008) was an important step for the institutionalization of HRE and the attempted instilling of human rights values among school children. However, these courses generate many problems regarding their programmes, textbooks, lack of appropriate pedagogy and teachers. These problems have not yet been addressed. One main reason for this, as we hypothesized, is that HRE courses have been incorporated into the curriculum not as solutions to present problems but as a requirement of modern civilization.

There are other factors at work too. The students’ responses demonstrate that neither textbooks nor teachers related the course content to pupils’ daily lives. The result was the nearly unanimous experience of students involved that the course was ‘boring’, ‘unnecessary’, ‘unimportant’ and ‘easy’. As active interpreters the students re-contextualized the human rights knowledge presented through the matrix of their
wider socialization including school, media and family. Despite the negative attitudes of the students, the findings show that they acquired some human rights knowledge, particularly that directly attracting their interests (such as ‘nobody could enter my house’). However, they interpreted this knowledge on the basis of what they see or experience in the wider society. What they see, mainly through media, is a Darwinian world of adults where nobody, as they perceive, ‘respects human rights’. They are aware of wars, human rights violations and injustices both within and outside national borders. What they told us illustrates that the children themselves feel weak, powerless and vulnerable.

The findings point to the importance of organizing education in order to empower students with an appropriate methodology, as repeatedly emphasized by educationalists (Baxi 1997; Meintjes 1997). Despite its difficulties, even in schools, as Tibbitts (2002, 167) notes, it is possible to adopt a transformative model of HRE, if the relevant links are made between students’ experiences and family or school life. An essential condition to achieve these aims is teacher education (Osler and Starkey 1996). This is crucial for Turkey where, as our findings show, HRE is not valued by teachers and many teachers are not aware of the link between their subject and HRE. Teachers should be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to promote a ‘global education’ (Osler and Vincent 2002) through which they would be able to address students’ experiences of local, national and global issues. This is crucial for Turkey where supranational developments (its candidacy to the European Union) and sub-national processes (greater visibility of its ethnic, mainly Kurds, and religious, mainly Armenians, diversity) currently sharpen political cleavages and challenges that will play an influential role in shaping the country’s and its citizens’ future.

Beginning with the academic year 2008–2009, these distinct HRE courses have been abolished. As part of the curricular reform, the Ministry of National Education decided to teach human rights themes as cross-curricular subject in various grades. HRE should not, of course, be limited to one course; it must be widespread in the whole curriculum. Nevertheless, having a separate course was of some help in drawing attention to HRE. A new project that has recently been launched by the Ministry of National Education and the Council of Europe is promising in this regard. The title of the project is ‘Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education’. At the end of this three-year project, a distinct course on HRE will be reincorporated into the curriculum. Other major aims of the project are to develop materials on HRE, to raise awareness of teachers on democratic citizenship and to revise the curriculum in terms of democratic standards. Revising the current curriculum is crucial since preliminary studies on the new textbooks report that they present old nationalistic knowledge with a ‘student-centred’ approach (Çayır 2009; Tüzün 2009). These textbooks, thus, need to be revised in terms of universal human rights standards. Exclusionary nationalistic phrases and images should be replaced by a more intercultural and pluralistic imaginary that would empower students for constructing a more democratic Turkey.

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Notes

1. The Ministry of Internal Affairs announced in 1999 that all governors, provincial governors and police chiefs had attended human rights seminars organized by the Education Department of the Ministry. The Ministry of Justice also reported that a great majority of judges and public prosecutors have been trained in human rights (Çayır 2007).

2. Göle (2000, 48) points out that ‘Non-Westerners are alienated from their own present which they want to overcome by projecting themselves either to the utopian future or to the golden age of the past’.

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