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Effects of the evidence-based history teaching on Turkish primary students' perception of history and related concepts

Nihal Doğan^a, Yücel Kabapınar^b *

^a *Veliefendi Primary School, İstanbul, 34760, Türkiye*

^b *Marmara University, Faculty of Atatürk Education, İstanbul, 34722, Türkiye*

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the effects of evidence-based history teaching on students' perception of the history and related concepts. The study was conducted as an action research. A teaching intervention was designed. The main theoretical perspective informing the teaching intervention was evidence-based history teaching. The teaching intervention was put into practice in a 8th grade class consisting of 25 primary students (aged 14-15). It lasted 15 teaching hours. The effectiveness of the teaching intervention was determined by using both a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions and worksheets used during the teaching intervention. Students completed the same questionnaire, designed by the researchers, prior to and after the teaching intervention. Additionally, students' works as in the form of worksheets were collected and analysed so as to find out effectiveness of the specific teaching activities. The descriptive and content analyses methods were employed in analysis of data collected. The findings of the study indicated that students' perceptions on history and related concepts changed as result of evidence-based history teaching used in their courses.

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1. Introduction

The current conception of history teaching, namely the evidence-based teaching approach requires students to find, evaluate and analyse information related to the historical events so as to develop historical thinking and reasoning which demand that they both learn about historical events and use interpretative reasoning. It is acknowledged that reasoning about historical events necessitates the use of a range of evidence to understand the nature of historical knowledge. This process may also assist students to grasp the importance and place of evidence in understanding the nature of the discipline of history (Husbands, 1996; Levstik & Barton, 1997). In other words, historical understanding should be seen as an act of judgement made on the basis of historical evidence. The written and illustrative evidences are the tools that allow students to take part in the interpretation process of historical investigation (Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994; Greene, 1994). In short, the use of evidences in history textbooks may give

* Yücel Kabapınar. Tel.:00 90 216 336 36 86-117; fax: 00 90 216 338 80 60
E-mail address: ykabapinar@marmara.edu.tr

students an opportunity; to gain more and detailed information about historical events; to gain an insight into the existence of different viewpoints; to understand that historical evidence and sources are at the heart of historical knowledge and understanding; to appreciate that reliability of sources is really important; and to recognize that every event in history can not always be fully explained due to lack of available evidence (Kabapınar, 1998).

In line with this conception of history teaching, textbook writers in the evidence-based teaching approach tend not to give all the reasons and results of historical events when providing the background information. They are not fully involved in the decision-making and interpretation process of historical events. It seems that the function and responsibility of the textbook writers has considerably altered since the evidence-based history teaching approach was launched in 1970's as expressed under the name of "The New History". They do not take an authoritative stance, but instead they have a very crucial and leading responsibility; to prepare the evidences related to historical events and activities which give students an opportunity to appreciate the nature of evidence in history, and to allow students to undertake historical investigation. Many countries have therefore made renovations in their history education programmes in line with this "The New History" approach.

Having accepted the constructivist philosophy in the first five grades of primary education as a first step, starting from 2004 in Turkey, curricular reforms have been announced, textbooks have been rewritten, classroom atmosphere from teaching activities to interactions has been re-described and assessment methods have been dramatically changed in the line of this new epistemology as well. Not only the content of the program has been subject to change but also the pedagogy adopted by primary teachers have started to change from the narrative, lecture type methods towards more constructivist approaches. As a result of this new program, the history teaching approach in the social studies course also underwent changes (Kabapınar, 2007). The primary aim of the instruction has become helping students acquire skills rather than gain knowledge solely. For example, some new ideas, concepts and skills such as "the use of primary and secondary sources", "the possibility and validity of different interpretations of historical events", "students' interpretations of history on the basis of the evaluation of primary and secondary sources in the social and cultural context, the limitations of historical sources" come to the fore in the new social studies program. Accordingly, these new concepts and ideas are complemented by an objective as "to acquire the methods that social scientist uses in the process of construction of the scientific knowledge" (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2004, 44). In this sense, the new curriculum appears to be more open towards modern scholarship of history teaching as compared to the old one. In line with this, the new curriculum also clearly defines and underlines the importance of helping students to acquire the skills such as "explaining different viewpoints", "recognising stereotype", "seeing others' perspective", "respecting differences", "differentiating facts from opinions and recognising propaganda" (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2004, 47-50). This new perspective of teaching social studies underlines and prioritise new concepts, such as enabling students have responsibilities of their learning, developing personal moral code based on their own preferences, and having different opinions and values. Having received instruction in the line of this new history teaching approach, students might be expected to perceive history in a more contemporary sense. It is important to find out whether this was the case. Thus, the question of "What is the level of effectiveness of the evidence-based history teaching on students' perception of history" constitutes the problem of this study. It should be noted that the new educational programme launched in 2004 was implemented in the first five grades of the primary level at the outset. After this level is completed, the renovations continued with 6-8th grades. In other words at the time of the present study, the traditional social studies teaching based on transmission of knowledge was the common method used in 8th grade classes. Therefore, an intervention was designed in the line of evidence-based teaching approach.

2. Method

The study was conducted as an action research which is one of the qualitative research methods. It involved investigating the effects of evidence-based teaching intervention over primary students' perception of some of the concepts such as history, purpose of history teaching, historians and historical evidence. The teaching intervention was put into practice in a 8th grade class during Atatürk's Principles and Revolution History course. Students who participated in the study were 14–15 years old (n = 24; 11 boys, 14 girls). As previously mentioned, at the time of this study which was based on the evidence-based history teaching was conducted in 2007, the traditional history teaching were in use in that grade. It was the next year when the new history approach was initiated.

The main theoretical perspectives informed the teaching intervention was the constructivist view and evidence-based history teaching. In the line of this, the teaching intervention was designed in that evidences as in the form of primary and secondary sources could be used in order that students can examine them to form their own viewpoints and value judgements. The teaching intervention involved nine instructional activities consisting of 24 evidences. Evidences were presented on worksheets by which the students could examine them as primary and secondary sources and answer the questions related to the sources. Different types of evidences were used in worksheets including official documents, proclamation texts, memoirs, letters, pictures, caricatures, poetry, films and maps. The teaching intervention lasted 15 teaching hours in total.

A questionnaire consisting of 4 open-ended questions was designed and used as an instrument to find out the effectiveness of the teaching intervention implemented. Students completed the same questionnaire before and after the instruction so that changes in their perception can be spotted. Content analysis was benefited in analyzing students' written responses to the open-ended questions. After the examination of students' responses, the main categories were formed under the specific themes. Having completed the analysis process, a second researcher was involved in the study as a second coder for reliability purposes (Patton, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The consistency between the two coding carried out independently by the two coders was found to vary 83%-97% for pre-test and 84% and 98% for post-test. This high percentage is a sign that the researcher was not involved personal perspective in analyzing the data and hence the internal reliability is maintained.

Additionally, students' works as in the form of worksheets were collected and analyzed so as to find out effectiveness of the specific teaching activities that make up the intervention. Hence, they used as another source for finding out the effectiveness of the teaching implemented. Students' written responses to the worksheets were examined at six levels as suggested by Vella (2001). These can be stated as; "understanding the evidence, expressing the evidence in another form, comparing the evidences, creating an original product from evidence, ability to determine bias in evidences and understanding the causality in evidences". The results of the analysis revealed progression in students' skills in using historical evidences. The main improvements were detected in the first four level skills mentioned above. Students' skills related to "ability to determine bias in evidences" and "understanding the causality in evidences" were found to be less improved as compared to others after the teaching intervention. Due to space constraints, the results of this analysis carried out for each worksheet were not reported in the present paper.

3. Findings

As previously explained, the effectiveness of the teaching intervention was determined via the change in the students' perception of some of the concepts related to history. Therefore students were required to answer open-ended questions prior to and at the completion of the intervention. Analyses of the students' responses to the questions appear in the pre & post questionnaire are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. students' responses to the open-ended questions appear in pre and post questionnaires

Questions	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Category	f	Category	f
1. Which concepts students use in describing "history" and "history course"?	Source/evidence	3	Source/evidence	24
	Political History Facts/ Concepts/Events	23	Political History Facts/ Concepts/Events	14
2. What are students' perceptions of the purposes of "history teaching"?	Citizenship Transmission	24	Citizenship Transmission	24
	Personal Development	6	Personal Development	16
3. What are students' perceptions about "historian"?	Scientist	17	Scientist	25
	Instructor-teacher	15	Instructor-teacher	4
	Author	1	Author	6
4. What are students' perceptions of what is	Historical Materials	21	Historical Materials	25

"evidence"?	Proof of the Past	4	Proof of the Past	7
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According to Table 1, prior to the teaching intervention majority of students (n= 23) described "history" and "history course" by using political history facts, concepts and events. Only 3 students referred to source/evidence in their responses. This numbers seem to be reversed after the teaching intervention as 24 out of 25 students underlined the use of evidence or source in describing history and history course in their post-questionnaire responses. The number of students who use political history facts, concepts and events seems to decrease in the post test (n= 14). One of the student's answers to the first question is presented below.

Student No.: 12

Pre-test

Germise... ışık... tutan... bilim...
 zayıf... ve... germise... dayanak...
 Kent... nesline... ve... insanlara... örnek... ve... yaptığını... gösterir

Translation

The science that sheds light on the past.
 It is enjoyable and based on the past.
 It shows what our ancestors and people did in the past.

Post-test

Tarih... bizim... bizde... yaşadığımız... devrin... tarihini... oluşturuyoruz.

We are the history; we will create the history of the age we live in.

It seems that this students perceive history as "science of the past" prior to the teaching intervention. This perception appears to be replaced by a view of seeing him/herself as a part and creator of history after involving evidence-based teaching activities. This can be viewed as a sign of developing historical awareness.

On examining students' responses to the question of "What are students' perceptions of the purposes of history teaching", the responses of the students fall into two main categories. These were; "citizenship transmission" and "personal development". Citizenship transmission category involved the expressions such as "to teach us our past, to take lessons, to learn what our ancestors did". Barr et. al. (1978) explained that citizen transmission is to train students to emerge with certain beliefs, values, viewpoints and convictions in order to be grown up to be good citizens by transmitting certain norms where "good citizenship" is possibly defined by "correct knowledge", "proper behavior" and "respect for authority". On the other hand, students' responses related to skills such as interpretation on history and historical evidence, critical thinking and the activities on the development of historical awareness were included in the personal development category.

According to Table 1, majority of students (n= 24) viewed citizenship transmission as the purpose of history teaching prior to teaching intervention. This number remained unchanged after the intervention. However, there is an increase in the number of students who described the purpose of history teaching as making contributions to personal development (6 raised to 16). These results illustrate the extent to which the citizenship transmissions view is effective on students' perception of the history teaching. In short, the 15-hour-teaching intervention was not enough to create a difference in students' perception of the purposes of history teaching, albeit extend it to involve its contribution of personal development as the following excerpt illustrates.

Student No.: 18

Pre-test

Bire tarihi öğretmek, öğretmek istemesi.

The purpose of history teaching is to introduce and teach history.

Post-test

Tarih insanın geçmişini öğrenmesini, bir kavramın içerisinde yorum yapmasını, düşünmesini, araştırma ruhuna sahip olmasını sağlayan düşünce sistemidir.

History is a system of thought that helps us to learn the past, to think and make interpretations and to acquire and develop our research skills.

Following from this student's pre and post-questionnaire responses, it is possible to say the purpose of history teaching is enriched. Prior to teaching intervention student suggested two purposes for history teaching. These were; introducing and teaching history. After the teaching intervention, however, the same student describes history as a system of thought and thereby stated four different purposes involving elements of it. In other words, the purposes of history teaching listed as thinking, making interpretations and acquiring research skills. This example of change in the perception reveals two important points; the first one is the emphasis put on personal/cognitive development via history teaching. The second one is the awareness of the students about the skills used by an historian.

The analyses of students' responses to the question "What are students' perceptions about historian?" indicated that students considered historian as scientists (n=17), instructor/teacher (n=15) and author (n=1) in the pre-questionnaire. Students' post-instructional responses fall into the same three categories. Yet, the frequencies changed. Students who perceive historian as scientist and author were increased in number (n=25 and n= 6 respectively) whilst perception of historian as an instructor/teacher was decreased from 15 to 4. As if they were little historians; students used, evaluated and interpreted the primary and secondary sources during the teaching intervention. It seems that these activities affected their perception of what a historian is. It can also be stated that after having involved in evidence-based teaching, students started to view historian as a person who conduct research and thereby does an academic job. This change can be seen in the example below.

Student No.: 24

Pre-test

Tarih dersini öğrencilerin anlayabileceği ve zevkle
dinleyebileceği bir kısıdır.

Translation

They are individuals who can teach history in such a way that students can understand and enjoy the history.

Post-test

Tarihi iyi bilen, sadece bir kaynaktan değil her kaynaklarda
araştırıp bizi en doğru bir şekilde sunan yazar kişidir.

Individuals who know the history well, conduct research using not only a single source but all kind of sources, and write or present it to us in the most correct way.

As can be seen from the example, prior to the teaching intervention this student defines historian as instructor/teacher who makes history courses more meaningful for students whereas s/he mentions the process and methodology that professional historians follow in constructing historical knowledge to describe historians. It seems that the student widens his/her horizons concerning what a historian is.

Table 1 shows that there is a slight difference in the pre and post-questionnaire responses of the students to the question "What are students' perceptions of what evidence is". Two categories emerged during the analysis. These were; "historical materials" and "proof of the past". Majority of students offered historical materials/documents as evidence in their pre and post-questionnaires (n= 21 and n=25 respectively). In other category, students described evidence as the proof of the past (n= 4 and n= 7 respectively). The analysis illuminates that this group of students focused on the 'examples' and 'function' of the evidences in history. One of the students' responses regarding historical evidence is given below.

Student No.: 8

Pre-test

Tarihte ilgili olayları belgelerle kanıtlara dayanarak anlatmaya
tarihsel kanıt denir.

Translation

Historical evidence means explaining historical events based on documents and evidences.

Post-test

Geçmişte yaşanmış olayları doğru ve kanıtlara dayalı anlatan
tarihsel niteliğe alan belgeler vb.

Historical documents explaining past events on the basis of facts and evidences.

The two explanations above seem to be very similar at the first sight. However, the emphasis on the words "facts" and "past events" in the post-questionnaire response can be considered as development in student's perception of historical evidence. There is not a difference in students' pre and post-questionnaire responses in quantitative terms. However, in general, a qualitative difference was detected in favour of students' post-questionnaire responses to explain importance and function of evidence in history.

4. Conclusion

The present study reveals that evidence-based history teaching leads to changes in students' perception of history and history course. It seems that students' perception shifted from a perception of history and history teaching as "facts and events of political history" towards a more evidence-based one as they emphasised the concepts of "source/evidence" in their responses. A similar shift could also be seen in their perceptions of historian. Their perception of historian as instructor/teacher appears to be replaced by "scientists" who conduct research by obtaining data from different sources and examining and interpreting them to form personal viewpoints. Nichol (1991) stated students become aware of the method that historians used when they involve such activities (e.g.

evidence-based teaching activities) as they are unable to find a clue about the identity of historian in textbook and teacher-dependent history lessons. Evidence-based history teaching helps students understand relative dominance of historian skills and this possibly leads students to describe historian as a scientist that investigate sources available which was the case uncovered in the present study. This could be taken as an indication that students started to view history teaching in a more contemporary way where it provides opportunity for them to produce knowledge/viewpoints by using evidences instead of transmitting knowledge in the classroom. As a matter of fact, in “New History” approach, students are expected to become aware of the methodology of history and the skills of historian.

Contrary to the case made above, the students’ perceptions regarding the purpose of history teaching seem to be changed to small extent as “citizenship transmission” was still seen as purpose of history teaching despite evidence-based instruction. It seems that this perception is a deep-seated one formed during all the years of schooling and become a core perception of history teaching. Yet, some of the students started to view history teaching as having an aim to contribute to personal development. Thus, it is possible to say that the evidence-based history teaching helped them to extend their perception of the purpose of history teaching by adding new elements to it. When begin to investigate the available sources/evidences for the purpose of gaining information students will find themselves in a position to use critical thinking, to make interpretations, and consequently to produce historical information, and describe the purpose of the course as a step for acquiring some basic skills, beyond merely learning historical information. Another area of perception investigated in the study was students’ perception of “evidence”. Findings showed that students’ perception of evidence remained unchanged despite evidence-based history teaching. They described their view by emphasizing “historical material” and “proof of the past” in their pre and post-questionnaire responses.

In short, implementing evidence-based history teaching in the classrooms helped students to re-define their perception of history and some of the related concepts to some extent. The idea to educate students as “good citizens of the society” via history teaching seems to restrain students’ perception of history and history courses “learning about past and what our ancestors did”. In this sense, the social studies/history teaching is defined as social agents responsible for “cultural transmission” in order to maintain cultural continuity and state existence. On the contrary, the notion to use evidence, students’ interpretations of history on the basis of the evaluation of primary and secondary evidence in the social and cultural context, the possibility and validity of different interpretations of historical events revealed the idea to perceive history and history courses from the perspective of their own personal development. The skills students used in interpreting and evaluating primary and secondary sources, differentiating facts from opinions in evidences, recognising propaganda in evidences, which students potentially acquired during the process of evidence-based history teaching, would help them to investigate all the written and/or visual sources and their reliabilities (such as media, political parties and so on) critically and to make wiser decisions and preferences in the daily life as well.

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