Uncritical Receivers of Historical Myths: A Grim Picture From Turkish High Schoolers

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The purpose of this study is to investigate to what degree students employ historical thinking skills they supposedly learn to master in history or social studies courses. The study has been conducted in a school district in a southwestern province of Turkey. A total of 93 high school students have taken part in the study. They were provided with statements about historically untrue beliefs and asked to explain whether or not they made any effort to check their accuracy. Whether or not they believe in the veracity of the statements and to what degree they have confidence in history courses they take in the schools have also been investigated. The results indicate that the students do not employ historical thinking skills outside the classroom. They do not check the authenticity of the information given to them via alternative sources. The study also revealed that the students have little trust in history courses in the schools. They believe that information in textbooks has omissions or is distorted. Kind of the school system found to be influential on this manner. Major sources shaping their historical knowledge lie outside of the schools.

Keywords: high school students, historical evidence, historical myths, historical thinking, social studies

Introduction

History is one, perhaps the only one, subject that has given place in curricula since the beginning of schooling. However, the reason for its being in curricula has not been fixed over the years. Husbands, Pendry, and Kitson (2003), for example, portrayed the situation as struggle between two competing schools in Britain: the great tradition and the alternative tradition. While the great tradition focuses on national history with a passive view of learner who memorizes historical interpretations of teachers or more precisely of the authorities, the alternative tradition focuses on different historical contexts with a view of learner who constructs the knowledge himself/herself. While the former aims to transmit the cultural capital, the latter intends to cultivate some skills that can be used in later life. Similar contrasts can be encountered almost in all countries. Stearns (1998b), for instance, argued that in the past, history was used as a tool to distinguish educated people from those who are not. This, he warned, may lead to memorization of facts without thinking about them much. Memorization is not so valued in the instruction of history any more. Students are expected to learn and apply specific ways of learning of history (Mandell, 2008). The mission of school history is to help students cope with problems they may confront in the later life and to assist them to make informed decisions (Wineburg, 2010). In order to attain this purpose, present day school history aims at equipping students with some way of thinking called historical thinking and special skills related to it.

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According to Seixas (2009), historical thinking is related to six secondary concepts. By the study of history, “Students should be able to: establish historical significance, use primary source evidence, identify continuity and change, analyze cause and consequence, take historical perspectives, and understand the ethical dimension of history” (Seixas, 2009, p. 29). According to Mandell (2008), students should ask questions about the past, gather sources and evaluate evidence in those sources, and draw conclusions supported by the evidence. Additionally, they should be able to interpret their findings in terms of historical categories of inquiry—cause and effect, change and continuity, and turning points—and (understanding the past) through their or past people’s eyes. Wineburg (2010) argued that school history should introduce to the students following skills: sourcing, contextualizing, close reading, using background knowledge, reading the silences, and corroborating.

School history in Turkey is a part of social studies course till the 8th grade. There is a course called Principles of Atatürk History of the Revolution in that grade, but courses named just “history” begin with the 9th grade. Due to centralized structure of Turkish education system, all the content and instruction to some extent are determined by the Ministry of National Education (MNE). The history course curriculum issued by the MNE (2007) projects that the courses encourage students to reflect, research, ask questions, and exchange opinions. It expects that students are to acquire some basic skills among which are critical thinking skills and research and inquiry skills. The curriculum also specifies some historical thinking skills as well. These skills are listed as chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, analysis of historical issues and decision-making, and research based on historical inquiry. It is quite clear that formation of the list heavily affected by historical thinking standards developed by the National Center for History in the schools at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) under the guidance of the National Council for History Standards (UCLA, n.d.).

To what extent Turkish students gain the skills the ministry expects them to gain is unclear, thus, it needs to be investigated. Do they really conduct research? Do they analyze historical issues before making a decision? To what extent they employ, if any, historical thinking skills? These questions are the main reasons we conduct this study. We hope that this study will shed light on where Turkish students are in terms of historical thinking and acting like historians and help educational decision-makers regulate history education, which is a difficult task.

Methodology

Research Design

This study is a survey research which is one of the quantitative research methods. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012), survey is a method that enables gathering of information from a group of people for the purpose of depicting some aspects or characteristics.

Participants and Sampling

This study has been conducted in a county in a southwestern province of Turkey. Participants of the study have been selected by two-stage random sampling. For this end, four of the 20 high schools existing in the county were selected randomly: (a) a social sciences high school; (b) a science high school; (c) a religious high school; and (d) a private high school affiliated with religious congregation. After that, schools were visited and all 12 graders were invited to participate. A total of 93 students volunteered to take part in the study.

Data Collection

Data have been collected through a questionnaire developed by the researchers. Reliability score of the research instrument is Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$. Items in the questionnaire consist of questions asked frequently to the researchers by their students. There are 14 items in the questionnaire. Eleven of them are statements that are believed as true although they are historically incorrect. The remaining three items are reserved for understanding to what extent students have trust in history courses they take in schools. The statements are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

The Statements Provided to the Students

Number	Statement
1	Sheikh İbrahim Hakkı Effendi of Kemah has been taken out of his grave and hanged according to a verdict mad by the Independence Court.
2	There are some secret articles of Lausanne Treaty and according to them, Turkey has been banned from extracting some mines/gas reserves in Turkey.
3	Lausanne Treaty has been made only a period of 100 years.
4	The first and the second Inonu wars were never happened.
5	According to a treaty signed during the integration of Republic of Hatay into Republic of Turkey, a referendum will be hold in the year 2013 to decide whether or not participation will continue.
6	During the Gallipoli wars, a cloud descended from the sky over an Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) troop, took the soldiers inside, ascended again and disappeared.
7	Mustafa Kemal Pasha was assigned by the Last Ottoman Sultan Vahdettin to start and direct the Turkish Independence War. Thus, real credit for the victory belongs to Vahdettin.
8	A crescent and a star came close and reflected on blood of martyrs during a war, and this reflection has been accepted as Turkish flag.
9	Ottoman Flag consists of three crescents on a red or green background.
10	Current Turkish flag accepted and began to be used after the proclamation of the republic.
11	After the World War II, some islands in Aegean Sea wanted to be given to Turkey, but Turkish President Ismet Inonu refused this offer.
12	Do you believe that some historical events have not been given place in textbooks in order to shape student views in certain ways?
13	Do you believe that some historical events have been twisted in textbooks in order to shape student views in certain ways?
14	Who do you trust most in order to create your historical knowledge?

After each statement, the students were asked firstly whether they heard information in the statement. Then, they were asked whether they believe the information true followed by if they checked the authenticity of the information from various sources and if they did, what sources they were.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed via the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program. Results were arranged as frequencies and percentages. In order to find out whether or not statistically significant differences exist among the high schools, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) has been implemented. The results have been reported in Tables 2 and 3.

Results

Student responses with regard to incorrect historical statements are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2

Student Responses With Regard to Statements 1-5

		Statement 1		Statement 2		Statement 3		Statement 4		Statement 5	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Awareness	Yes	13	14	58	62.4	45	48.4	25	26.9	25	26.9
	No	80	86	35	37.6	48	51.6	68	73.1	68	73.1
Source of information	Internet	2	15.4	3	5.2	2	4.4	1	4.0	1	4
	Friends	-	-	5	8.8	1	2.2	1	4.0	1	4
	Books/magazines	-	-	5	8.6	4	8.9	5	20	1	4
	Media	-	-	2	3.4	2	4.4	-	-	1	4
	Teacher	-	-	-	-	1	2.2	3	12	2	8
	Scholars	-	-	-	-	1	2.2	1	4	-	-
	Family	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	No answer	11	85.6	43	74.1	34	75.6	14	56	19	76
Check with other sources	Yes	5	38.5	13	22.4	16	35.6	6	24	10	40
	No	8	61.5	45	77.6	29	64.4	19	76	15	60
Checked sources	Magazines	-	-	1	7.7	1	6.3	-	-	-	-
	Internet	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	The Constitution	-	-	-	-	1	6.3	-	-	-	-
	No answer	5	100	12	92.3	14	87.5	6	100	10	100
Belief in veracity	Yes	24	25.8	60	64.5	45	48.4	22	23.7	28	30.1
	No	69	74.2	33	35.5	48	51.6	71	76.3	65	69.9

Table 3

Student Responses With Regard to Statements 6-11

		Statement 6		Statement 7		Statement 8		Statement 9		Statement 10		Statement 11	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Awareness	Yes	53	57	45	48.4	59	63.4	57	61.3	33	35.5	45	48.4
	No	40	43	48	51.6	34	36.6	36	38.7	60	64.5	48	51.6
Source of information	Internet	3	5.7	1	2.2	2	3.4	1	1.8	-	-	-	-
	Friends	4	7.5	4	8.9	2	3.4	-	-	-	-	1	2.2
	Books/magazines	3	5.7	4	8.9	3	5.1	5	8.8	4	12.1	1	2.2
	Media	1	1.9	1	2.2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Teacher	2	3.8	2	4.4	3	5.1	1	1.8	2	6.1	1	2.2
	Scholars	-	-	2	4.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2.2
	Family	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	3.5	-	-	-	-
	No answer	40	75	31	68.9	49	83.1	48	84.2	27	81.8	41	91.1
Check with other sources	Yes	17	32.1	12	26.7	9	15.3	18	31.6	5	15.2	15	33.3
	No	36	67.9	33	73.3	50	84.7	39	68.4	28	84.3	30	66.7
Checked sources	Magazines	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Internet	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
	The Constitution	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	No answer	17	100	12	100	9	100	18	100	5	100	14	93.3
Belief in veracity	Yes	31	33.3	31	33.3	41	44.1	48	51.6	34	36.6	47	50.5
	No	62	66.7	62	66.7	52	55.9	45	48.4	59	63.4	46	49.5

The results demonstrate that the most common false belief is statement 8, followed by statement 2, statement 9, and statement 6 respectively, which are heard by the majority of students. Then, the students were asked about source of these information, but it seems that they could not recollect the source. Percentages of students who were unable to remember where they got the information are as follows: 83.1% for statement 8; 74.1% for statement 2; 84.2% for statement 9; and 75% for statement 6. When they were asked whether they checked the accuracy of the information from alternative sources, they generally responded negatively as seen in Tables 2 and 3. Negative answers are 84.7% for statement 8; 77.6% for statement 2; 68.4% for statement 9; and 67.9 % for statement 6. When students who claimed that they controlled authenticity of the information from various sources were asked to specify the source they used, most of them were unable to manifest their sources. Percentages regarding students who were unable to specify the sources they consulted are as follows: 100% for statements 8, 9, and 6, and 92% for statement 2. Although we have discussed only four most common ones here, an examination of Tables 2 and 3 reveals that same interpretation is valid for the remaining statements as well.

The last three of the statements were designed to determine how much students have trust in history courses they take. Results regarding to this end are provided in Table 4.

Table 4

Student Responses Regarding Their Trust in History Courses They Take

	Valid	<i>f</i>	%
Statement 12	Yes	60	64.5
	No	33	35.5
	Total	93	100.0
Statement 13	Yes	57	61.3
	No	36	38.7
	Total	93	100.0
Statement 14	Textbook	3	3.2
	Teacher	6	6.5
	Internet	14	15.1
	Family	4	4.3
	TV	2	2.2
	Political leaders	1	1.1
	Someone who I trust	24	25.8
	Other	9	9.7
	No answer	30	32.3
	Total	93	100.0

The results in Table 4 show that 64.5% of the students believe that some historical events were omitted from textbooks and 61.3% of them believe that information in textbooks was distorted in order to direct students think in some certain ways. One fourth of the students depend on someone they trust for shaping their historical knowledge while students expressing trust for textbooks and teachers remained only 3.2% and 6.5% respectively.

Whether or not differences originating from school types exist will not be reported here although we run the tests and find out statistically significant differences. We do that for two reasons. Firstly, the general picture we found so grim that we do not think it is appropriate to discuss details. Secondly, since the number of the

participants is relatively small, we do not want to condemn or reward such big school system over a handful of participants. However, we could not help reporting differences regarding statements 12 and 13 due to reasons that will be discussed below. First, we will report whether or not statistically differences exist regarding school types in Table 5.

Table 5

ANOVA Results Regarding Differences in Terms of School Type

		Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Statement 12	Between groups	6.485	3	2.162	12.994	0.000*
	Within groups	14.805	89	0.166		
	Total	21.290	92	-		
Statement 13	Between groups	5.830	3	1.943	10.653	0.000*
	Within groups	16.235	89	0.182		
	Total	22.065	92	-		

Note. * $p < 0.05$.

Since ANOVA results indicate a statistically significant difference, we run a post-hoc test to see where exactly these differences occur. The results are provided in Table 6.

Table 6

Tukey Test Demonstrating Where the Differences Arise

Dependent variable	School type	School type	Mean difference	Std. error	Sig.
Statement 12	Science	Social sciences	-0.11111	0.15200	0.884
		Religious vocational	0.43590*	0.16328	0.044*
		Congregation	0.50667*	0.13111	0.001*
	Social sciences	Science	0.11111	0.15200	0.884
		Religious vocational	0.54701*	0.14845	0.002*
		Congregation	0.61778*	0.11211	0.000*
	Religious vocational	Science	-0.43590*	0.16328	0.044*
		Social sciences	-0.54701*	0.14845	0.002*
		Congregation	0.07077	0.12698	0.944
	Congregation	Science	-0.50667*	0.13111	0.001*
		Social sciences	-0.61778*	0.11211	0.000*
		Religious vocational	-0.07077	0.12698	0.944
Statement 13	Science	Social sciences	-0.11111	0.15917	0.898
		Religious vocational	0.28205	0.17098	0.357
		Congregation	0.48667*	0.13729	0.003*
	Social sciences	Science	0.11111	0.15917	0.898
		Religious vocational	0.39316	0.15545	0.062*
		Congregation	0.59778*	0.11740	0.000*
	Religious vocational	Science	-0.28205	0.17098	0.357
		Social sciences	-0.39316	0.15545	0.062*
		Congregation	0.20462	0.13297	0.419
	Congregation	Science	-0.48667*	0.13729	0.003*
		Social sciences	-0.59778*	0.11740	0.000*
		Religious vocational	-0.20462	0.13297	0.419

Note. * $p < 0.05$.

Discussion

First, we will discuss results regarding two statements that exemplify remaining ones as well. According to Tables 2 and 3, the most common untrue historical knowledge is the one about the creation of the Turkish flag. Although the flag was accepted by Ottoman Sultan Selim III personally in late 18th century (Engin & Vurgun, 2014), it is believed inaccurately that it is a reflection of a crescent and a star over blood of martyrs. Out of 59 students who heard this statement, only nine of them checked the accuracy of information, and none of them was able to recollect which sources they used for checking. More alarmingly, 44.1% of the students believe that this statement is true. Believing in myths without researching might be a result of overemphasizing national identity in school history courses (Low-Beer, 2003). Statement 6 originates from testimony of Frederick Reichardt (Hayward, 2010), who was a New Zealander veteran of the World War I. Fifty-three students had heard the claims and only 17 of them needed to check its accuracy. Similar to statement 2, none of them remembers which sources they applied. Although the claim clearly contrasts with laws of nature and accordingly with logic, 33.3% of the students believe that the statement is true. Although we discussed only two of the findings here, an examination of Tables 2 and 3 will reveal that the same interpretation is valid for remaining statements as well.

We infer that these findings indicate one sad truth that the students do not apply historical thinking skills in real life situations, let alone historical matters they encounter. They demonstrate historical thinking skills in controlled classroom environment under teacher supervision, but outside the classroom, they do not.

Seixas (2009) evaluated that evidence is a key aspect of learning about a matter under investigation. Without evidence, it would be really difficult to learn what happened in the past. A similar view can be found in the study of Voss (1998), which alleged that making evaluations based on evidence is an inherent part of reasoning in history. Students' examining different sources before making a judgment and learning how to examine sources are indispensable parts of historical thinking (VanSledright, 2004). Barton and Levstik (2003) argued that the basis for teaching history is education for citizenship, and effective citizens are those who ground their views on evidence. Otherwise, they urged that students will not be able to distinguish a myth from a justified evaluation and this will destroy foundations of democracy. The authors assert that students must approach with suspicion to any extraordinary story they may be told. This exactly what does not happen in Turkish history courses, it seems.

When it comes to the second part of the study, which aims to understand whether or not students have trust in history courses they take in schools, approximately two thirds of the students believe that some historical accounts are distorted or omitted from textbooks in order to make students think in a certain way. These findings seem to contradict with Wineburg (1991a), who asserted that high school students find textbooks trustworthy, or Paxton (1999), who argued that students see textbooks evidence of historical accounts. Wineburg (1991b) stated that students are not skilled enough to read historical texts critically. Thus, they have no option but have trust in textbooks. Could the results in this study interpreted as Turkish students read historical texts critically which lead them not to have trust in textbooks? Just reading passages above makes us to answer this question with a "No". We believe that the answer lies in the structure of the participants. Most of them are students from a high school related to an Islamic congregation plus students from religious vocational high schools. We speculate with a great caution that students in these schools are more religious, they may identify secular state with infidelity, and thus, they have less trust in textbooks approved by the MNE.

Conclusion

Results of this study reveal one sad truth that there is something wrong with history education in Turkey or at least the school district, where this study is conducted. History education does not honor its promise to equip students with a special way of thinking that they can use in later life. Students seem not to convey the skills they are taught in classrooms into real life. They do not control accuracy of the information given to them. Most importantly, they tend to believe the information they have not checked. These are poles apart from purposes of history education in K-12 schools. However, as a light of hope, Stearns (1998a) claimed that exercises especially focused on to develop a certain skill are indeed useful to foster that skill. He calls for more experimental research to develop models for developing certain historical skills. Perhaps this is what we still need in classrooms. More focused and more rigorous work helps to achieve what we promise. Another important finding is that students seem to be ideologically conditioned towards history. Differences between religion intensive schools and other schools cause us think that way. If this is the case, what we need is clear: more and effective historical thinking and a more transparent history in our classrooms.

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