



## Problems of geography education in Turkey

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### Abstract

Geography, which is developing rapidly and getting attention in the countries of the European Union and the United States of America, has unfortunately not received the value that it deserves. Moreover, some of the problems related to geography education that were brought forward in the 1950s are yet to be solved. In this study, some of the main problems occurring in Turkey in geography education are scrutinized.

**Keywords:** Geography; geography education; problem; Turkey

## Türkiye’de coğrafya eğitiminin sorunları

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### Özet

Avrupa Birliği ülkelerinde ve Amerika Birleşik Devletleri’nde hızla gelişen ve değer kazanan coğrafya, maalesef Türkiye’de bir türlü hak ettiği ilgiyi görmemiştir. Öyle ki, coğrafya eğitiminin 1950’li yıllarda ortaya konan bazı sorunlarının bile hala çözülemediği ortadadır. Bu çalışmada, Türkiye’de coğrafya eğitiminin başlıca sorunları incelenmeye çalışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Coğrafya; coğrafya eğitimi; problem; Türkiye

## 1. Introduction

Geography is a key science in the consistent improvement of understanding the phenomena that happen and are likely to happen in nature. Geography is for living (Bednarz *et al.* 1994). The uniqueness of geography lies in the fact that geography deals with things intermingled with each other: humans and places; their distribution; relationships between each other; and the timing that they cover (Martin, 1995). The necessity of teaching and learning geography may have dimensions that concern geographers as well as everyone. Each and every individual needs to have knowledge of geography in order to solve natural and social problems effectively (Girgin, 2002). Therefore, it can be said that the need for knowledge of geography increases over time.

An understanding of geography would improve responsibility in the development of countries, allow people to comprehend the different characteristics of places that result from the distribution of human and economic events, make us protect the environment by loving it, show us how much the welfare and happiness of nations depends on the geographic environment: geography is an important social science that could teach us to interpret maps, pictures, graphics and diagrams. But this social science has been neglected in our country for years. Geographers and the knowledge of geography, which is used in western countries in many fields (especially in planning), have not been able to gain the respect that they deserve. Doğanay (1989) mentions this fundamental problem of geography by saying “geography, as thought by some people (among which there are also some scholars and statesmen), is not and can not be the social science that makes people memorize the names of mountain, river, creek, city .... Because we can not even see such a simple empiric approach in the geographic point of view of Strabon.”

In many western countries, geography is used in academic studies and in school education as well as in practical life. For example, geography is one of the four branches of the sciences of the United States Geological Survey, which is one of the institutions from which Americans get advice for important decisions that give direction to American politics (the other branches are geology, water resources and biology) (Arı, 2008). For the development of Turkey and to benefit from its resources, it is important to get help from geography’s research and assessment principles (Doğanay & Zaman, 2002). Geographers should be given authority and tasks in the fields of physical and economic planning’s. This is what is done in western countries. Approximately 40 % of regional and city planners are people who have had geography education (Fisher & Erol, 1981). Geography is as important

as history with respect to patriotism. It should be accepted that the formation of national values is related to the wealth and continuity of a nation. This national spirit can be given in geography lessons (Güngördü, 2002). It should not be forgotten that fatherland is geography itself (Doğanay, 1989). More importance should be given to the social science of geography because of Turkey's geopolitics location and the condition of the world political geography (Taş, 2007). In the preparations of the Turkish educational system, this should be kept in mind. Moreover, administrators with a strong and coherent general knowledge and culture of geography would have the facility to continue good and proper administration (Koçman, 1999).

In Turkey, unfortunately, the aim of geography is not completely understood. Whereas in America and Europe, geography is getting more and more developed, unfortunately here it is less popular than it was in 1950s. For many years, geography programs were run by inexperienced people. From time to time, it has even been removed from the curricula of high schools completely. Making students understand that geography is a part of life and geographic knowledge can be used without the limitations of time and place may increase the interest of young people about geography (Efe, 1997).

Thirty-five years ago, Erinç (1973) put the problems of geography in a row as follows: lack of equipment and tools; graduates not being able to find jobs; graduates not having sufficient knowledge; the need for geography departments to be reconstructed; and graduates needing enough knowledge to be employed in a definite job (Ilgar, 2006). What makes us sad is that the things that Erinç (1973) specified 35 years ago are still the subjects of this type of work.

## **2. The Main Problems of Teaching Geography in Turkey**

### **2.1. Curriculum Problem**

An important problem of teaching geography in Turkey is that of the curriculum. The geography curriculum has been shortened for many years and is being changed frequently; these are among the main problems of teaching geography.

With the establishment of Medrasahs during the Seljuks, Geography and History lessons were introduced as educational programs (Sönmez, 1996). According to Maarif-i Umumiye Regulations dated 1869, geography lessons, which were taught under different names, were taught in Darulfunun (Istanbul University) branches (Akyüz, 1993). According to the 1915 curriculum, Plants, Animals (Zoology) and Cosmography were taught along with

Geography. In the Middle School curriculum in 1922 and in grades 7, 8, and 9 in 1924, geography was taught for one hour weekly, and in grade 10, it was taught for two hours (Gürsoy, 1992). According to the First Geography Congress in 1941, geography was taught as General Geography in all grades of high school and was taught as Geography of Turkey in the 3rd Grades. This continued until the application of modern programs in 1973. In this decade, History, Geography and Citizenship lessons were integrated with Social Knowledge. However, in the 1974-1975 Academic Year, geography lessons were removed from the first grades. Moreover, some parts of the geography curriculum (such as physical geography of Turkey and neighbors of Turkey) were taken out of the geography syllabus (Doğanay, 1989). This continued until 1980, when changes in geography lessons were distributed to all high school classes of like as in the 1975-1975 academic year. The topics are compiled as Geography 1 for General Geography, Geography 2 for Geography of the Countries and Geography 3 for the Geography of Turkey; these are all distributed to the High School Grades 1, 2 and 3. Moreover, every unit is supported by the topics selected from the Geography of Turkey. According to Doğanay (1989), despite some faults, the geography curricula of 1940-1980 are comparatively more satisfying, whereas secondary education geography curricula that were started in the 1987-1988 academic year presented geography only as showy lessons. By this time, geography lessons were completely removed from Trade High Schools and Industrial Professional High Schools, and were made optional in the science departments of High School Grades 1 and 2. Geography lessons were given in High School Grade 1, and only in Grades 2 and 3 in Literature Departments. It is obvious that these changes were not in favor of our education (Doğanay, 1989).

In Middle School, the system of credits started. This project, which was done in 1974-1975 as "Subject Passing and Credit System Project", failed to succeed after the second try and was removed from the educational system in the 1995-1996 academic year (Caner, 1998). With this system, subjects were grouped as common or optional. The subjects that a student has to take to graduate are Mathematics 1, Science 1, Turkish Language and Literature 1, Foreign Language 1 and History 1. Whereas History was among the common subjects, Geography was not. However, students could take Geography 1 and 2 in any of the six academic semesters.

By the changes written in the Magazine of Notification number 2455 and published by the Ministry of Education dated June 17, 1996, while Geography was taught in secondary education as common general knowledge in all fields (Science, Social Science, Turkish,

Mathematics, Foreign Language and Art) of 9th Grade, it was removed from the common general knowledge subjects of grades 10 and 11 (Şahin, 2001).

The last revolutionary change in geography curricula was made in 2005. This is the first program prepared for curricula approaches (Karabağ & Şahin, 2007). After all the changes, Geography has become a subject under the name 'Geography' from grades 9 and 12, and it has a spiral structure which is student-centered and constructive. Geography teaching programs were prepared for teaching two hours weekly in grades 9 and 10, and 4 hours in grades 11 and 12. It was thought to be compulsory in grades 9 and 10 for all High Schools and optional in grades 11 and 12 of science fields as well as in Science High Schools.

Turkey had a strategy of knowing the world with an increasing tempo in the 1950s and 1960s in the fields of Social Science. Hence, while European history, geography lessons and western music in music lessons were emphasized, western thinkers gave more importance to philosophy. This policy in Social sciences continued until 1980s and from the year 1982 this notion was gradually abandoned. Today, in History and Geography curricula, Turkish History and the Geography of Turkey are dominant. Turkish Music in Music curriculum, Turkish thinkers in Philosophy curriculums are started to be given more importance. This policy about the mentioned programs still continues (Okutan, 1998).

Finally, it can be said that most of these changes occurred in Geography programs and the number of the lessons since years back have degraded the importance of Geography education, rather than developing it. According to research (Meydan, 2007, Artvinli, 2006), the new programs have some problems with the applications and once these problems are overcome, the new program may be a success.

## ***2.2. Problems related to the lack of equipment and rigging***

One of the main problems of geography education in Turkey is the lack equipment, with no standard among the schools, and the reaction of teachers to these problems is not at the expected level.

How and in what way to teach the needed information is very important in education. The success that can be had by comprehension of the lesson has a close relationship with teaching techniques and other variables. However, teaching methods should be supported with visual materials. An important part of geography in secondary education consists of abstract knowledge. It is very important and necessary to use

equipment and materials in class.

Recent studies (Alım, 2003) illustrate that there is no standard among schools in the use of equipment; moreover, there are important shortages. For instance, there are no Geography Technology classes and geography classes are more like geography classes in most of the schools (Artvinli, 2006).

The use of visual materials that may appeal to more than one sense should be increased. In addition to classical materials and equipments, schools should be enriched and rigged with modern technologic materials. The Ministry of Education has important responsibilities in this respect. The use of equipment and materials in the classes should be taught to geography teachers in in-service teacher training courses and geography teachers should be made sure to join these courses. The teacher candidates should be given more facilities and chances to use the available equipments and materials in the in-service teacher training institutions.

Besides the lack of equipment in the schools, geography teachers' attitudes are not at the expected level. Not even the classical materials are used enough by some of the geography teachers, let alone the materials required within the frame of contemporary education (Doğanay, Zaman & Alım, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary to take precautions to make geography teachers comprehend the importance and the necessity of the use of materials and equipment in the lessons.

By the start of the use of a new geography curriculum in 2005, the quality and the number and especially the variety of the materials used in the geography classes increased. This new geography curriculum compels the congenial geography learning atmosphere and classes (Demiralp, 2007).

### **2.3. Teacher Training and Problems Related to Profession**

While some important developments are occurring in the world, unfortunately, in Turkey the questions such as What is Geography? Who is a Geographer? What do Geographers do? still need to be answered Most of the people who are studying geography based on an insufficient syllabus and through books centered on memorization still see that geography is the encyclopedic knowledge of places (Özçağlar, 2003).

There is an ambiguity in training geography teachers in Turkey. With the rehabilitation of Educational Faculties (1996), the training of geography teachers is completely assigned to the Educational Faculties. It is mandatory for geographers who are

graduating from other faculties to continue to the Faculties of Education (3 semesters). Therefore those geographers who have graduated from other faculties face a lack of clarity in the identity of their profession. It is necessary that the professional identity of geography graduates should be redefined clearly.

In Turkey, there is a problem in training more teacher candidates than are needed in every subject including geography. The planning of human work is not being done in this country. Public Administration has no idea about how many and what quality of people are needed, within how many years, in which subjects and fields (Doğanay, 2002). Therefore, most of the trained teacher candidates cannot find jobs.

There are 14 Geography departments under the Literature and Science-Literature Faculties, and nine Geography teaching departments. It is not possible for all the graduates of these departments to be appointed as teachers by the Ministry of National Education. This is why the students graduating from the non-educational faculties should be helped to find employment in different areas of work. But, currently, Literature and Science-Literature Faculties are not using a different program from that of the Educational Faculties First of all, these programs should be rehabilitated in a way to employ the graduates. To give geography and the geographers the place that they deserve, the new trends in geography and research fields should be integrated into Turkish geography in the academic and applicable levels (Mutluer & Ölgen, 2003).

#### **2.4. Problems related to course books**

Some of the problems related to geography books are that they are not prepared by experts and are generally published for commercial purposes. The people preparing the geography books are either those geography teachers who have no academic aims or academicians who have no first-hand-experience in secondary education. Thus, in the books, in addition to scientific errors, there are many pedagogic mistakes. It may be beneficial for geography books to be prepared collaboratively by academicians and experienced teachers. Moreover, those academicians who have the experience of being teacher should be encouraged to prepare geography course books.

One of the problems is that the books are prepared for commercial purposes. The fact that course books contain physical, economic, anthropologic and geographic information on countries written by the same author gives us this notion that the books are written for financial gain. However, every course book should be written by experts in the field.

In addition to the above-mentioned problems, there is also a problem related to the language used in geography course books. In order to use a clear language, the writers eliminate some important scientific information while simplifying the books (Doğanay, 2002). It is obvious that there is a need for books that are strong in content and suitable for the students' level of understanding.

### ***2.5. The Image Problem of geography and the Geographer***

Whereas geography is accepted as one of the more popular social sciences in the west, it has a prestige problem in Turkey. Among the students of secondary education, geography is unfortunately known as an insignificant subject based on memorization. This notion from students, who have no idea about the use and importance of geography, should not seem strange. As mentioned by Doganay (1989), even among the Statesmen and scholars, geography is known as a social science that is only used to make people memorize the names of mountains, plateaus, plains, and streams. It should be promoted that geography, which is a branch of social science that can easily be understood and performed, is not actually about rote memorization, but that making a real geography synthesis is not easier than solving a difficult math or physics problem, and can even be more difficult than that (Gürsoy, 1943- Tanoğlu, 1964). Besides, in Turkey, university entrance exams (ÖSS) make some subjects like geography relatively unimportant. The subjects from which the number and the value of the questions are more heavily weighted are more popular among the students. It is obvious that geography is not one of these subjects.

It should not be forgotten that one of the main duties of geography is to research mutual influences of events within fields by very different sciences; this is a necessity in the geography discipline (Sevgi,1984:54). In other words, geography is the social science that deals with correlation and assessment (Erer, 1977). It should also not be forgotten that, depending on the geographical environment, political, cultural, social and economic fact affect the culture, politics and international relations of our country very deeply (Koçman,1999).

It is important for a new image of geography that geographers find a place in television programs, newspapers and magazines, in platforms from which they address the public and become experts in general social and environmental issues, and also develop a language to share these with the public (Murphy, 2006-Kaya, 2008). From now on, what is important is to reform and improve the image of geography. This can only be possible by



applying new trends and research areas.

### **3. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The fact that the geography curriculum has been shortened and changed very frequently has degraded the quality of geography education in Turkey. When the problems related to the application of the geography curriculum are solved, the problems that originated from the curriculum will be minimized.

Lack of instruments and equipment is another problem for geography education in Turkey. It is obvious that there are no standards among schools, and teachers are not enthusiastic to use materials. The Ministry of National Education should try to solve these problems, and technology-enriched geography classes should be made available. With some necessary precautions to be taken by the Higher Education Board and in service educational courses, the importance and necessity of the use of equipment and materials should be explained to teachers.

As in other branches of teaching, there are also some complexities in the education of in service geography teachers. It is clear that there is a disparity and disagreement between the Faculties of Education and Literature. Thus, who will become geography teachers should be made clear, and curricula should be redesigned to employ students in other fields after graduation from the Faculties of Literature. The number of the candidates for geography teachers is excessively more than we need, therefore necessary plans should be made.

It should not be forgotten that the success of the curriculum depends on well-prepared books. However, some problems related to geography books catch our attention. It is necessary to prevent the books from being written hastily and recklessly with financial gains in mind.

In addition to the above problems, geography has a prestige problem as well. It is accepted among the students as well as the members of the entire community, that geography is a subject that requires memorization and is insignificant. This is partly caused by central exams. It is the duty and responsibility of geography teachers and academicians to make sure that the necessity and the significance of learning new trends and research fields in geography may be integrated with geography education; that this may play a crucial role.

Consequently, geography, 'which is the very life itself' has many problems that have to be solved immediately. It is very disturbing to realize that the problems that were put forward 25-30 years ago are yet to be solved.

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