Examining characteristics of a primary school in terms of school effectiveness and improvement paradigms

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Abstract

School improvement includes collaborative activities and planned change to develop teachers, staff, environment and physical conditions. Other hand school effectiveness involves effectively using all resources of school for increasing the success of students. This study aims to investigate Cacabey Primary School, in city of Kırşehir, Turkey in terms of school improvement and school effectiveness paradigm. Case study method is used in this study. Research was conducted with the head teacher of the school. In this direction semi structured interview was used for collecting data. Data were classified and analyzed qualitatively. Under the light of the findings of the research it is concluded that most of the features of the school improvement paradigm were largely achieved in this school. Accordingly some recommendations were made at the end for further research.

Keywords: School improvement, school effectiveness, head teacher, educational change.

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, there are number of attempts at changing the education systems and its components by means of strengthening and improving the quality of provision of education for the nations' citizens. The necessity of these efforts derives from the changes in the social and technological climate of our societies. Education is probably the most affected part of a country's system. The aim is to raise the standards of schools and their outcomes with the goal of improving the quality of education for all and consequently strengthen the education system in terms of both structure and quality. Educational reforms around the world aim to help schools accomplish their goals more effectively by replacing some structures; programs and/or practices with better ones (Fullan, 1991). In this respect, two school development paradigms emerged in the world of educational research to guide educational practitioners to raise the quality standards of education. These paradigms are namely school improvement and school effectiveness.

School improvement described as deliberate and sequential actions which change learning conditions and other related internal conditions for provide educational goals more effectively (Harris, 2002). According to Hopkins (2004), school improvement is working to make schools better places, the other definition is perceived as a explicit approach to enhance student outcomes while strengthening the school's adequacy for managing change (Lee & Williams, 2006). Moreover, Mortimore describes school improvement as the process of improving school organizes, promotes and supports learning (Lee & Williams, 2006). School improvement includes collaborative activities and planned change to develop teachers, staff, environment and physical conditions. So school improvement is not only focuses on student achievement but also all the conditions of the school (Harris, 2002).

On the other hand, the concept of effective school has also been established in order to improve the quality of education in the schools (Çubukçu and Girmen, 2006). In economics, "effectiveness" is defined to mean profit when the desired output is achieved (Scheerens, 1992). However, in the context of education, school effectiveness can be described as means of students' outcomes (Samy & Cook, 2009). On account of this, the starting point for effective school research is echoed as "some schools are more successful than others".

Effective schools use appropriate physical environment, instructional materials and all the resources of the school for the success of students (Çubukçu & Girmen, 2006). School effectiveness is seen as the degree to which schools achieve their goals, in comparison with other schools that are equalized, in terms of student-intake, through manipulation of certain conditions by the school itself or the immediate school context (Scheerens, 2000). As mentioned above school effectiveness research can make a difference to the educational performance of students (Muijs, 2006).

School effectiveness has its origins in research and theory, educational practice and policy (Edmonds, 1979). School effectiveness research has attempted to find the factors of effective education that could be introduced or changed in education through school improvement. Despite its relatively short history, school effectiveness and improvement has shown some success in linking effectiveness and improvement (Creemers & Reezigt, 2005).

In the related literature, many researchers emphasized that in effective schools professional development needs of teachers to be run on (Alkins, et al., 2006; Watzke, 2007). According to Ball (1997), teachers are willing to make changes to their teaching practices when they are empowered to determine the focus of the changes they believe are necessary. It is echoed in many studies that teachers need professional development opportunities that they can try in their classrooms, thus making the classroom a learning laboratory (Cobb, Wood, & Yackel, 1990). Guskey (2002) argues that teachers need appropriate professional development opportunities which help them to become more effective teachers in the classroom. One way to support the improvement of teachers and administrators is professional development (Guskey, 1994). When teachers are not highly qualified in their content area, students may fail to make adequate yearly progress. Professional development activities are designed to increase the content knowledge and skills of teachers so that they improve their teaching (Servilio, 2009). There are variety of projects around the world aimed to increase the quality of schools as well as learning outcomes.

School Improvement and School Effectiveness Projects around the World

- **The National School Improvement Project (LPS) (Netherlands)**

The aim of this project was to improve pupil results starting grade 3. The LPS project is defined involving improvements for school level, educational leadership of the principal and the adaptation of the educational programme to pupil needs. The evaluation was limited to improvement at the classroom level because of financial limitations (Jong, Houtveen & Westerhof, 2002). After the LPS project was finished, four new school improvement projects began. The first two were finished and turned out to be successful in terms of improvement as well as pupil outcomes (Houtveen, Van de Grift & Creemers, 2002).

- **Improving The Quality Of Education For All (IQEA) (UK)**

The IQEA school improvement project obtained an example of how a school improvement project could evolve and bridge between the first and second waves (Reynolds et al., 2005). The IQEA aimed to produce and evaluate a model of school development, enhance student outcomes through focusing on the teaching learning process as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change and providing quality education (Hopkins *et al*., 1996). In the project, the improvement and effectiveness paradigms were mixed in particular these include improvement and change processes with input on school and classroom effectiveness and measurement of outcomes (Reynolds et al., 2005). IQEA reflected many of the principles of authentic school improvement (Hopkins, 2004). The project began with nine schools in 1991 then involved 40 schools in several areas of the UK. The school identified priorities for development and its own methods to achieve these priorities. It also participated in the evaluation of the project and shared findings with other participants in the project (Reynolds et al., 2005). The IQEA team supported arrangements, provided training for the staff of school, made regular school visits, provided staff development materials and monitored the implementation of each school's project (Hopkins, 2004).

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- **The Dutch National School Improvement Project**

The Dutch National School Improvement Project (NSIP) was conducted in the Netherlands, started in 1991–1992 and took for three years. Beginning results have been reported in 1995 (Houtveen & Osinga, 1995). A major goal of the National School Improvement Project was to increase educational advantage, especially in reading. The background of the study was that there are clear differences between schools in effectiveness, especially with respect to student performance language and reading. The school improvement project made use of the knowledge of school effectiveness research (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2003).

- **The OECD International School Improvement Project**

This project was conducted 1982 and 1986 and sponsored an International School Improvement Project (ISIP). ISIP built on previous OECD/CERI initiatives such as The Creativity of the School (Nisbet, 1973) and the INSET (Hopkins, 1986) projects. ISIP took a more holistic and systemic views of educational change (Hopkins, 2004). At a time when the educational system as a whole faced not only retrenchment but also pressure for change, this project focused on school improvement for strengthening the school's capacity for problem solving, at making the school more reflexive to change, as well as enhancing the teaching (van Velzen et al., 1985). In the period of this project some large-scale studies of school improvement projects were also conducted. The 'Study of Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement' was particularly important (Crandall, 1982).

- **The Lewisham School Improvement Project in London (UK)**

The Lewisham School Improvement Project was conducted in the spring of 1993. This project was made with the cooperation between Lewisham schools, Lewisham Local Education Authority (LEA) and the University of London, Institute of Education. The project aimed to enhance pupil progress, achievement and development; develop the internal capacity of schools for managing change and evaluating its effect at whole school level, classroom level and student level; develop the capacity of the LEA to provide data to schools that will strengthen their ability to plan and evaluate change and integrate the above with the

system's ongoing in-service and support services to form a coherent approach to Professional development (Reynolds et al., 2005).

- **Halton's Effective Schools Project (Canada)**

The Effective Schools Project started in 1986 in Ontario. This project attempted to bring the results of school effectiveness research carried out within Britain into the schooling practices of Canada. However, it soon became clear that potential difficulties involved in the project's implementation could only be resolved by the adoption at school and system level of organizational and planning arrangements from the school improvement literature. Essentially, top-down mandates to schools did not address the issues of ownership and commitment, nor did they pay attention to the process and impact of the changes upon those who worked to implement the policy mandates (Reynolds et al., 2005).

School Improvement Projects in Turkey

- **Planned School Development Model**

The planned school development model, developed AR-GE (Research and Development) directorate, an affiliation of the Ministry of National Education, is an outcome of a long-lasting project which has been developing through the piloting practices since 1996 (EARGED, 2007). The model seeks to develop, apply and evaluate strategic planning.

The plan supposed to be instrumental so as to promote the effectiveness of the school, pave the way for strategic targets and objectives that are of vital importance. The steps to be taken throughout the project are establishment of a school development board, strategic management and planning at schools, school development plan, implementation of the development plan, revision and structural assessment, implementation of the revised school development plan and filing a report (EARGED, 2007).

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- **School Development Program**

The model which will be used in Turkey for the first time, aims at enhancing capacity management, promoting education and increasing the matriculation rates in primary and secondary schools. Since the Secondary School Development Project financed by SSDP will have been finalized on 31 December 2011, the school development program will have been completed by the same date. To this end, a total of 2710 schools from 25 provinces and 46 districts within these provinces were funded. 2252 of these schools are primary and 158 were at secondary level and they are all affiliated to the Ministry of Education (MNE, 2010). By allocating financial aids, the school development program aims at improving the learning conditions of the students in the districts where matriculation rate is below 90% or the ones which were badly influenced by the recent economic recession, promoting students' performance and achievement, creating a supportive atmosphere based on increased performance and achievement, fostering the creativity of the teachers and the managing stuff, ensuring quality in education and boosting the effectiveness of the learning environment. Moreover, improving the capacity and encouraging the involvement of families and society, designing school development plans, providing opportunities for application capacity, increasing matriculation, attendance and success in the schools that were chosen are other desired outcomes (MNE, 2010).

Under the shed light of these projects, in order to understand the possibilities of improving school conditions for better teaching and learning outcomes, a closer examination of a primary school in Turkey was needed as a case study. There are almost no studies in Turkey which examines internal conditions of individual schools in terms of its potential for improving the quality of education for all. It is assumed that this study will to contribute to a clear understanding of inner development processes of a primary school in more scrutinized way.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine Cacabey Primary School in Kırşehir, Turkey with respect to school improvement and effective school paradigms. The study also aims to observe main

characteristics of the school in terms of its potential to implement development projects in the future.

Research Questions

In the study answers to following main questions were sought:

1) What is the current state and status of the school in terms of its physical conditions?

2) How the school culture is defined by the head-teacher?

3) How features of school improvement and school effectiveness paradigms are identified by the head-teacher on the basis of school where he works?

4) What is the potential of the school in terms of implementing change and innovation projects?

Methodology

Research Design

This study designed in qualitative research approach. According to Bryman (1988), one of the fundamental characteristics of qualitative research is its commitment to viewing events, actions, norms, values, etc. from the perspectives of the people who are being studied. In this study, the head-teachers' perspectives of the educational change and school improvement is a major source of data. As Fullan (1991) points out 'educational change depends upon what teachers do and think' (p.117).

The application of case study method used in this study. Case study is a strategy in which a researcher investigates a single phenomenon within its *real context*, restrained by *time and activity*, and collects *detailed information* (Stake, 2000; Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2008). Purpose of case study researcher is to observe the caharcteristics of an individual unit – a child, a clique, a class, a school or a community (Cohen and Manion, 1996). In this repect the current study utilizes the case study method to focus on Cacabey Primary School in terms of its

characteristics and features of school improvement and effective school paradigms. The idea behind examining reflective views of a head–teacher was to have a clearer understanding of their thought processes and feelings, and accordingly to utilize the "theoretical sensibility" (Strauss & Gorbin, 1998, cited in Ekiz, 2006:46).

Participants

The study was conducted with the head teacher of Cacabey Primary School in city of Kırşehir in Turkey. The head teacher started his teaching profession in 1981. After teaching in a couple of provinces, he was promoted to the head teacher position in 1985 in various schools in Kırşehir city centre. A random sampling procedure was employed, in which the participant and the school were randomly selected. Then, the participant was asked if he was willing to participate and he was chosen upon his agreement to get involved.

Data Collection Tools

The study uses semi-structured interview to gather descriptive data. Pre-prepared interview form include semi-structured questions under three main headings: a) current conditions of the school (history, physical conditions, workplace, policies, its success); b) teacher professional development activities (past, present and future); and c) potential for developments.

Analysis of the Data

Before the analysis of the data, interview recordings were transcribed into the texts. All the interview records were transcribed verbatim, with no intervention. After development of the structure, which emerged from the text data, the task of actual data analysis was carried out. The findings were classified and analyzed qualitatively. In the process of analysis, transcribed text was examined closely and through making categorizations, emerged themes were obtained in line with research questions. Since the data collection instrument was semi-structured, conversation texts were coded under the semi-structured themes. Despite answers sought to research questions were spread over to the interview document, researchers were

able to map out the responses given by the participant and inserted into the themes where appropriate. Finally, findings of the study was presented in a narrative way

Findings

History of the School

The head teacher reported that the school was established in 1968 and was one of the two important secondary schools of the city in that time. Most of the adults of the day were reported to have graduated from that school. Moreover, the school was reported to be one of the first schools that adopted primary education in Turkey during 1980s. The name Cacabey, as the head teacher reported, stands for a person named a scientist, who studied mathematics and astronomy in 1200s.

Staff information about the school

Today, one head teacher, one deputy head-teacher, three civil servants, six attendants, 60 teachers are employed in the school and 1200 students are reported to be receiving education here. The school is equipped with 35 classes, playrooms and sports facilities. Average 34 students per classrooms are enrolled in the school.

School Culture

The head teacher reported that teachers, students and school management acted cooperatively and the communication, therefore, is daily. This cooperation could be the key to success according to him. The head teacher also reported that during parents' meeting and teachers' meeting, everybody can speak freely and tell his/her ideas, discuss the matter in question and recommend some alternative methods. In support of his ideas, he exemplified the different methods that they follow for the 6th, 7th and 8th graders.

Furthermore, that they are together with their neighborhood and are in close contact with the university has been stated. This is attributed to the huge number of academicians he had met before and the trainees who came to the school for their research projects.

Their school, unlike other institutions, has different habits and some rules which are not prescribed. He gave a lot of examples to support his argument. An example to this is the parent counseling committees in which 2 or 3 parents from each class participate. Another example is that the school is open throughout 24 hours both on weekdays and at the weekend. This created more opportunities for the parents' visits and the teachers and parents could benefit from the Internet access during this time. The head teacher continued exemplifying by stating that most of the people in the community learnt how to use a computer in this way.

The School as a Work Place

The head teacher stated that they might have some weaknesses in terms of both the personnel and the teaching staff, but the important thing is to make the best use of given opportunities. The head teacher, moreover, stated that thanks to the support they receive from the Ministry of Education, they were well-equipped compared to other schools in the province and they will make the most use of this advantage. He provides an example stating that some schools do not let their students use their computers and after a considerable amount of time these computers break down, even if untouched. However, they let them use computers and have so far changed them 3 times.

Moreover, drawing a comparison with the other neighboring schools, the head teacher underlined that they had a different atmosphere, happy teachers who own personal offices, and were trying to support all the teachers with necessary equipments as long as they can afford to.

School's Success

The head teacher stated that pupils, teachers and especially the parents are caring the test results more in recent years and therefore social and cultural activities decreased. He also stated that pupils could play table tennis, handball, basketball, volleyball, badminton, do boxing and wrestling in their own schools despite the situation mention above. On the other hand, the head teacher mentioned that they were the most successful school in all academic fields in overall province in the former OKS tests (end of year school exams) and the recent SBS test (school success exams) after private schools. However, he also added that they had

some problems in mathematics and that they assigned some weeks as "week of mathematics" and some months as "month of mathematics" to remedy this problem.

Extra-curricular Activities Carried Out by the Students

The head teacher said that extracurricular activities are relatively important for them. As he illustrated, in the last four months, a group of students attended tree planting activities four times, visited hospitals as part of social service, and visited the elderly people.

The Behavior Policy

The head teacher stated that they overcame some undesired behaviors with the cooperation of guiding and counseling teachers and guidance offices. He stated that when they confronted an undesired situation, they attempted to solve it on their own first. Then if necessary they called for the help of parents. Moreover, the head teacher told that the guide teachers, classroom teachers and school administration dealt with every student individually; and they acted as parents when necessary.

On the other hand, the head teacher stated that they have a reading club in their school and the ratio of frequently reading students was very high. In order to achieve this, the students were demanded to summarize the book they've read, book exchange was made available and most importantly, the habit of reading was tried to inoculate to students. The head teacher told that the students recorded the number and names of the book read by each child. Furthermore, he stated that they gave various presents and certificates to the most successful reader of each class at the end of each month.

The Display Policy

The head teacher stated that they had a school library in which all kinds of World and Turkish Classical books exist and they also had class libraries containing many different books. The students could find the opportunity to read any kind of books they desire in these libraries. Additionally, the head teacher told that they displayed students' and teachers' works and products' on the school boards in the corridors and on the web site of the school. Most importantly, the head teacher told that they put no restriction to students and the students could display their works even at the school garden.

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Opportunities Provided by the School for Teacher Development

The head teacher stated that they gathered very often in the meetings and organized seminars. They provided teachers with opportunities of professional development, they discussed scientific articles on education in the school and they demanded from the teachers returning from seminars to share their experiences with fellow teachers. On the other hand; English, Mathematics, Social Science, Science and Turkish teachers were instructed that they should be in firm cooperation. The head teacher exemplifies this by a Mathematics teacher calling for the help of Arts teacher in order to present 3D pictures in Geometry class. Thus, the head teacher tried to enable cooperation among all teachers especially the teachers of the five important fields mentioned above. Besides, the head teacher added that they tried to complement the deficiencies of a new teacher and this teacher fulfilled the desired adaptation only after two years.

Leadership Provided by the Head Teacher

The head teacher stated that leadership should be in everyone, and in order to be a leader one should find acceptance from the other parties, should be an expert in his/her profession, should have self-confidence and have a good working habit. The head teacher added that he identified the needs of the school appropriately and shifted the staff in that direction. Besides, the head teacher described himself as the leader who is working hard, behaving reasonable, being organized and accomplishing tasks in due time.

Decision Making Process of the School

The head teacher divided the school decisions in two groups. He stated that if the decision was related to teaching and learning then the administration and the teachers come together to discuss on the best decision to take. However, if emerged issue was related to administration then they work with management team which includes the head-teacher and deputy head teachers. The head teacher stated that they got the parents participate in their decision making mechanism because their priority was the children. They got the parents' participation mostly via parent meetings.

Implementation of School Development or Effective School Projects

The head teacher stated that as in other schools in the country, they have put a lot of efforts to implement government imposed Total Quality Management (TQM) strategy in their school. According to him as the school they have achieved the standards of TQM in great extent. Moreover, the head teacher stated that they have a School Development Plan developed under the instructions of MNE. In order to implement this plan they have they cooperated with a vocational high school and with the Research and Development Unit of National Ministry of Education (EARGED). Although they achieved many aspects of the plan, it is reported that strong co-operation and collaboration was not established with the university to carry out in depths school improvement projects.

Potential of the School for Implementing Projects

The head teacher stated that the school is appropriate for a project. He justifies his argument with stating that the administration, students and parents were conformant to certain criteria and they had sufficient potential. He emphasized that his teachers are enthusiastic for change and try to attend In-Service Training seminars to follow recent trends in education. He believes that schools should adopt innovations in order to keep up with change however; they cannot get sufficient support from the education faculty in this matter.

Condition of the School in Terms of Teaching – Learning

The head teacher stated that the children in this age group were more intelligent than old times; they accessed knowledge much easier. Therefore, the head teacher stressed that teachers should be trained better in terms of subject field knowledge and pedagogy and added that most teachers in his school fulfilled this quality. In this regard, the head teacher thinks that the teachers should access knowledge before students. Only then he thinks the teachers can best present the knowledge to the pupils. In addition, the principle thinks that the teachers should have a strong evaluation system as well as good subject field knowledge. The head teacher gives the example that most pupils in the school answered the question "Who is a good teacher?" as: "who understands me" to support his argument.

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Conclusions and recommendations

The school focused in this study is one of the oldest schools in city of Kırşehir. In this regard, the previous experiences of the school itself and its current head teacher produced excellent results. The number of staff and the pupils in the school seems to be ideal for this school. The school gives emphasis to social and cultural activities as well as education and these shows the broad vision of the school.

The school communicates very well with its environment and provides a good setting for both the pupils and the teachers. Furthermore, it is the most successful school following to private schools in the province and additionally they did not content with this achievement and stretched to sports fields. When we look at the policy of the school regarding student behaviors, we see that they are most successful in dealing with each pupil one by one when necessary and giving the habit of reading to them.

The teachers and pupils have ample opportunities to display their performances anywhere they want. A good mechanism had been created in the school to enable teachers' professional development. The headmaster tries to lead the school in a good way with an awareness of good qualities of a leader. On the contrary, school staff had no effect in the decision making process of the school. Thus, having gone beyond the ideas of an effective school paradigm, this school lacked in the contribution of school staff in this effectiveness. Effective school paradigm captures an instantaneous photo of a school in terms of student success, whereas improved school paradigm tries to improve the school in this process by all means. If we want to achieve a high quality education, cooperation is compulsory in the school. This requires the active cooperation of government, headmaster, teachers and other staff in the school during this process (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2003).

Although, no ministry or university authorities came to this school to implement a project, it is believed that a school development project can easily be implemented in this school and a good result can be obtained in a short time. Moreover, this school can outperform many others in school development projects in the future with its well-established system although it has undertaken no projects before.

Overall, on the basis of observations and interview with the head-teacher in the school it can be said that the traditional views about education in our schools will change dramatically in the near future. Because our schools could not still pass the level of not knowing how to satisfy external demands and come to the level of organizing external demands according to their own conditions. However, it is believed that this school fulfills the criteria of effective school paradigm in most extent. For instance criteria such as the capacity of the head teacher to specify the goals, comprehension of educational goals, an appropriate setting for teaching-learning, high educational expectations of teachers from the pupils and continuous evaluation of student achievement (Levine and Lezotte, 1990), were reported to be achieved by the school. Among these factors, some of our schools may lack in providing an appropriate environment for teaching-learning and capable head teachers but most of them may be argued to satisfy most of these factors. The school has been made an ideal environment by satisfying most of the factors of effective school paradigm. The school not only maintains the belief that a good education should be provided but also provides it.

The head teacher of a school is the same as the manager of a company. But differently, head teachers do not concentrate on profit, but rather they try to strengthen every component of a school. In this regard, the development of head teacher is an important component for the improvement of schools (Bush, 2008). When we look at the studies on developed schools, we see that a head teacher has a key role in developed schools to organize external demands according to the needs of the school, and to adapt its staff quickly to these needs (Hopkins et al. 1994; Stoll & Fink, 1992).

Another role of head teachers is to display their leadership in terms of education. This depends on the belief of the headmaster about the school's aim as providing good education (Levine & Lezotte, 1990). Schools work for several purposes but the primary purpose of a head teacher is to improve the learning environment in the school (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). The headmaster of Cacabey Primary School fulfilled this goal by staying at this post for 16 years and improved his school excellently in every field. The school's capacity for development is an important indicator for the headmaster's efforts (Fullan, 2001). This indicator is obvious in this school so the efforts of the headmaster are evident.

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The focus of school development researchers should shift from school level to classroom level. In this context, the beliefs of teachers about the content of curriculum and instructional activities become more important (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2003). School development studies require concentrating on teachers' beliefs and practices. Longitudinal and in-depth studies should be carried out to identify the processes of implementing change and innovation in schools.

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