

## Using Controversial Issues In History Lessons: Views Of Turkish History Teachers

### Tarih Derslerinde Tartışmalı Konuların Kullanımı: Türk Tarih Öğretmenlerinin Görüşleri

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to determine the views of Turkish history teachers about teaching controversial issues. A qualitative approach was used in this study in order to gather data in response to the research questions, and the information itself was secured through a semi-structured interview. 20 history teachers who joined this study were chosen from the province of Trabzon through purposive sampling. In the light of the data, it seems that history teachers do not teach controversial issues; nor do they have either the education or skills to teach controversial issues in their history courses.

**Key Words:** History Teacher, Controversial Issues, History Education, Turkey

#### Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı Türk tarih öğretmenlerinin tarih öğretiminde tartışmalı konuların öğretimine yönelik görüşlerini ortaya koymaktır. Çalışmayla ilgili olarak belirlenen soruların cevaplarını bulmak için veriler nitel bir anlayışla elde edilmiştir. Araştırmada veri toplama aracı olarak yarı yapılandırılmış mülakat kullanılmıştır. Çalışmaya amaçlı örneklem yoluyla seçilen ve Trabzon'da görev yapan 20 tarih öğretmeni katılmıştır. Elde edilen verilere dayalı olarak çalışmaya katılan tarih öğretmenlerinin tartışmalı konuların öğretimine yönelik eğitim ve becerilerinin olmadığı anlaşılmaktadır. Buna ilaveten, ortaya çıkan bir diğer sonuç ise bu öğretmenlerin derslerinde tartışmalı konuları öğretmedikleridir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Tarih Öğretmeni, Tartışmalı Konular, Tarih Eğitimi, Türkiye

## 1. Introduction

In the discourses of Turkish educational research, teaching controversial issues is quite a new concept, having emerged fairly recently. Several researchers in social studies and history education have grown interested in perceptions of student teachers and teachers regarding using controversial issues in education (Ersoy, 2011; Çiçek, 2011; Yılmaz, 2012). Despite this, controversial issues have not been attached to history and social studies curriculums adequately in Turkey. The reason for this is that the great majority of Turkish society, especially decision makers, believes that controversial issues are political and ideological, especially in history and the teaching of it. Furthermore, although there is no empirical evidence to prove this claim, the public – which has an effect on the education policy of the Turkish National Ministry of Education – believes that controversial issues that are not reliable and scientific are not being taught in history lessons in Turkey.

Although the teaching of controversial issues is a new concept in the Turkish education system, in the last two decades there has been much research about using controversial issues in education in those countries which are developed and which have a liberal democracy. As the relevant literature is examined, it seems that using controversial issues has long been on the teaching agenda in the developed world. It has been accepted that teaching controversial issues helps society to transmit some crucial skills to students. For example, problem solving, critical thinking and collaboration, which are crucial in the 21st century, can be taught through using controversial issues. These skills have grown more important in the developed world because life is becoming ever-more complicated, and there is a belief that people should be taught how to solve and cope with the problems that they encounter. Besides this, it is thought that students should also be given information about controversial contemporary issues, because in the 21st century we face a range of such difficult issues (Stradling, 2001).

There is a debate about what ‘controversial’ means, because there is no universally accepted agreement on it (Wassermann, 2011). Although there is no consensus, however, it can be conceptualized as a subject about which there are intense public argument, disagreement or disapproval (Collins Cobuild, 1997, p. 357). Wellington (2006) offers a similar definition: that there is controversy if there is no general consensus on values, attitudes or beliefs about the subject. Topics concerning sex, sexuality, drugs, nuclear power, religion and scientific debate are examples of controversial issues (Wellington, 2006).

Controversial issues also have an emotional dimension, and effective teaching of these issues requires emotional engagement (The Historical Association, 2013). During the teaching of controversial issues, students need to acquire some personal feelings about the people involved, as well as the choices and dilemmas these people faced (The Historical Association, 2013, p. 8). Furthermore, discussing controversial issues also helps students to develop high levels of self-esteem (Oxfam, 2006, p. 3).

There are other reasons why controversial issues have been given attention in schools. First of all, it is accepted that teaching controversial issues is at the core of a democratic education (Department of Education, 2008, cited in Wasserman, Francis and

Ndou, 2008), because students can develop an understanding of and commitment to democratic values such as toleration of dissent and support for equality (Hess, 2002). Second, controversial issues help students to study relevant social problems, past and present, encouraging them to make informed decisions and reach informed conclusions (Byford, Lennon and Russell, 2009). Third, students can develop the ability to use critical thinking skills, such as information-processing, reasoning, enquiry, creativity and evaluation (Oxfam, 2006). Furthermore, students can recognize that differing viewpoints are valuable and normal as elements of social discourse (Byford, Lennon and Russell, 2009).

The above skills are important for modern societies because healthy democracies need informed and responsible citizens who have the skills of critical thinking and problem solving. Besides this, citizens should respect differences within society. Furthermore, effective and responsible citizens should also be open to dialogue that can help to solve the problems they encounter in their societies.

History and social-studies courses can be used to introduce problems and issues to students because historical knowledge provides multiple perspectives. For example, different perspectives can be seen when a war is reported in the government papers of different countries. Besides this, diaries give often conflicting information about the same historical events.

History as a social-science subject thus inevitably involves controversial issues. For this reason, controversial issues are not only important for historians, but also for history teachers. Furthermore, students can develop historical knowledge and interpersonal skills in history classrooms by addressing controversial issues and studying them, which is necessary for transition and progress in terms of historical understanding (Wasserman, 2011).

Teaching controversial issues in history education has recently been considered, and has become a part of, curriculums in schools for the above reasons. Especially in Ireland, England, the USA and South Africa, controversial issues have been given attention in history curriculums (McCully, 2005; Wasserman, 2011).

## **1.2. Controversial Issues in the Turkish History Curriculum**

History has been one of the most important social science subjects in Turkey since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, paid great attention to history and history education as means to develop the national identity of citizens (Demircioğlu, 2008). For this reason, history has been taught from a positivist perspective since 1923 in Turkey. In other words, history education in the Turkish education system is based on a supposedly objective but single-narrative approach. Students are not expected to engage in and learn multiple perspectives or address controversial topics.

History as a separate subject is compulsory at secondary level in Turkey. At primary level, there are social-studies courses, and some of the units in these social-studies courses are devoted to history – mainly Turkish history. History and other curriculums based on the positivist perspective have been criticized in Turkey (Demircioğlu,

2001), and curriculum reform began in early 2000. Through this process, which took place from 2007 to 2012, the Turkish history curriculum was renewed; the new curriculum is now based on a constructivist approach, and history teachers are required to teach history in an active way. Despite these new initiatives, some history courses are still taught in a traditional way ('chalk and talk') in the majority of history classrooms in Turkey (Demircioğlu, 2010).

Even if the Turkish history curriculum is being examined in terms of introducing controversial issues, it seems that this concept is not mentioned in the curriculum (MEB, 2007; MEB, 2008; MEB, 2009). And yet, although controversial issues are not mentioned in the history curriculum, the 10th-grade history curriculum program now includes a special section which requires history teachers to teach topics concerning Armenian, Greek and Syriac issues (MEB, 2008), examining how these issues emerged and evolved. Besides this, 10th-grade students in the history classroom are also given information about the present situation of these issues. Nevertheless, although the Turkish history curriculum does now give information about such issues, they are not taught as controversial in history education.

Armenian, Greek and Syriac issues are seen as controversial at the international level because there are different views regarding the events that took place between Turks, Armenians and Greeks during and after the I. World War in Anatolia. The great majority of the Turkish public and Turkish historians do not accept the claims of Armenian and Greek historians, who accuse the Ottomans and Turks of mistreatment of their people, which took place during and after the I. World War in Anatolia.

### **1.3. Teaching Controversial Issues in Literature**

Over the past three decades, there has been international research on teaching controversial issues in education. Research indicates that student teachers in teacher-education institutions have not been given adequate education to help them address controversial issues (Harber and Serf, 2006). Besides this, among teachers there is no agreement on what is controversial (Hess, 2008). Furthermore, teachers prefer using lectures and memorization work based on textbooks when teaching controversial matters (Siler, 1998).

The related literature indicates that teachers have different opportunities for teaching controversial issues in liberal democracies and non-liberal democracies. Teachers are not keen to use controversial issues in the latter countries; for example, teachers in China are reluctant to teach political controversial issues because these issues were not part of the official curriculum (Misco, 2011). To take another example, in Singapore the state has a direct influence on how teachers teach controversial issues in the classroom (Ho, Alviar-Martin, and Leviste, in press). In the USA, although teachers have more freedom and opportunities, many social-studies teachers are not keen to use controversial issues in their courses (Davies, Gregory and Riley, 1999; Misco and Patterson, 2007; Hess, 2008). And history teachers in South Africa see little educational value in using controversial issues (Wasserman, 2011).

Although teachers in some countries want to use controversial issues, introducing controversial issues into the classroom is an extremely complex enterprise (Hess, 2008),

and teachers encounter difficulties. For example, in China, Singapore and Canada there is a fear of not meeting curricular objectives if they teach controversial issues (Alviar-Martin and Ho, 2011; Bickmore, 2002; Misco, 2011, cited in Ho, Alviar-Martin and Leviste, in press). Besides this, in Canada and the USA teachers avoid teaching those issues to do with religion and sexuality (Bickmore, 2002; Evans, Avery and Peterson, 2000, cited in Ho, Alviar-Martin, and Leviste, in press). Furthermore, teachers' own emotional responses in certain countries, such as Cyprus, Israel and Northern Ireland, affect how they teach controversial political issues (Bakerman and Zembylas, 2011; McCully, 2006; Kambani, 2012, cited in Ho, Alviar-Martin and Leviste, in press).

When the related literature regarding the views of history teachers on using controversial issues in history courses is examined, it emerges that there has been little research carried out involving history teachers in Turkey. One study was conducted with 17 history teachers, based on a structured interview (Çiçek, 2009). The researcher asked what kinds of controversial issues there are in history education in Turkey. The history teachers stated that the controversial issues in history education are minorities in the Ottoman Empire, the revolutions of Greeks, Serbians, Bulgarians, Armenians and Arabs, the Armenian issue, the crusader mentality of the West, and the I. World War (Çiçek, 2011).

In another study, Yılmaz (2012) carried out research regarding perceptions of Turkish social-studies teachers about controversial issues and taboo topics. In the light of this research, it emerged that Atatürk and his reforms were seen as the most important controversial topics for Turkish social studies teachers. Furthermore, Ersoy (2006) carried out research with social-studies student teachers who had incorporated controversial issues in the teacher education process, and asked for their views about using controversial issues in education. The data revealed that student teachers believed that controversial issues should be included in the teaching process (Ersoy, 2006).

Examining the views of Turkish history teachers on the introduction of controversial issues is important because there is no other study about this issue in the Turkish social-studies literature. As mentioned above, there has only been one similar study, carried out by Çiçek (2011), which aimed to elicit what were the controversial topics in the eyes of Turkish history teachers.

Besides this, the Turkish attitude to this issue is important for making comparisons between Turkey and other countries – especially Western countries – because it has been the aim of Turkey to become a part of Europe since the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Furthermore, the results of this research enrich the international literature about the views of history teachers concerning using controversial issues in history teaching.

## **2. The Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to determine the views of Turkish history teachers about controversial issues.

### 3. Method

A qualitative research approach, which provides opportunities to gather data in depth in small-scale research, was used in this study to determine the views of history teachers about controversial issues. The research involved semi-structured interviews to gather data about history teachers' attitudes to the use of controversial issues in history lessons. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data-collection tool because of their capacity to generate high-quality, detailed and rich information about views, attitudes and orientation (Bell, 2007; Cohen and Manion, 2007). The interviews followed protocols for the use of appropriate language and wording and the avoidance of leading questions (Drever, 1997). The questions of the interview, based on the related literature, were developed by the researcher. In order to conduct the interviews there were two phases: preparation, using a pilot study and review; and then the interviews themselves. The pilot study involved four history teachers evaluating and commenting on the original schedule: in the light of their feedback the questions were modified. Besides this, two history teacher educators teaching in education faculty checked the interview form and they stated that the form is clear and comprehensible.

#### Participants

This study was carried out with 20 experienced history teachers in the city of Trabzon from September 2012 to February of 2013. Four of the teachers (%20) were female and sixteen of them (%80) were male. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants from six different high-schools in the city center of Trabzon. The criteria for choosing teachers were as follows. First of all, schools, which history teachers teaching are well-established, are seen to offer high-quality teaching in the region. Besides this, teachers at these schools are experienced in teaching history, because it is impossible to teach at these schools without at least 10 years' experience. Teaching experience was important when choosing teachers, and in fact all of the teachers who participated in the study had at least 13 years' teaching experience.

#### Collecting Data

Before gathering the data, the researcher informed teachers about the aim of the research and teachers were also informed that the knowledge collected by interviews would be used for scientific purposes. Besides this, teachers were informed that personal information of teachers would remain anonymous which increased the trustworthiness of the gathered data. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, and the researcher carried out face to face interviews with participants from September 2012 to February of 2013. The interviews were taped with twenty history teachers took approximately 10 hours. History teachers were asked the following questions:

- 1-What kind of training were you given about how to use controversial issues?
- 2-Do you teach controversial issues in history lessons? If you answer yes, which topics do you teach?
- 3-Do you think there are controversial issues in the Turkish history curriculum? If you answer yes, could you list these topics?

4-What are the benefits of using controversial issues in history lessons?

5-What kinds of problems could emerge when you use controversial issues in history lessons?

6-What kinds of teaching approaches can be used in teaching controversial issues in history lessons?

After interviews, information was taped during the interviews organized and shared with interviewed history teachers. Teachers examined collected data and expressed their ideas about the notes based on the interviews. All history teachers gave feedback regarding accuracy of notes of interviews and this process increased trustworthiness and credibility of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Glesne and Peshkin, 1992).

### **Data Analysis**

In this research, the data analysis was based on inductive analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). First of all, the interviews were analyzed and checked. Second, the responses to the semi-structured questions were summarized and classified into specific categories of answers in order to create a systematic analysis of the data. Finally, the following categories were composed.

- History teachers' level of education regarding controversial issues in history lessons.
- Teaching of controversial issues in history lessons.
- Controversial issues in Turkish history education.
- Benefits of using controversial issues in history lessons.
- Difficulties in using controversial issues in history lessons.
- Approaches that can be used for teaching controversial issues in history lessons.

The following activities were also made to increase the validity and reliability of the study. First of all, a research assistance was given the analyzed data to check how much agreement there was about analyzed data and the research assistance reached 100 percentage agreement (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Besides this, the researcher used direct quotations from each categories and themes during the presentation of the data. Direct quotations are evidence of collected data increasing trustworthiness of the research (Drever, 1997).

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

Turkish history teachers' perceptions about using controversial issues in history lessons were investigated by way of semi-structured interviews in this research. In the light of the data, it seems that the history teachers who participated in the study did not use controversial issues in their history lessons. The interviews revealed that the teachers shared the following attributes.

#### **4.1. History teachers' level of education regarding controversial issues in history lessons:**

All participants were asked what kind of training regarding how to use controversial issues in history lessons they had been given. In the light of the data, it seems that history teachers were not taught how to use controversial issues for history lessons. One teacher said that "We were not given education how to use controversial issues, and I did not hear about controversial issues in my university education. Actually, we were educated like historians, not history teachers. For this reason, we did not have adequate information about this topic". Another teacher made a similar statement: "We were not given education about how to use controversial issues in history lessons through in-service education. The education which we were given was based mainly on Turkish and Ottoman history. Our teacher educators were pure historians". These results are in line with the results of Harber and Serf (2006), that teachers are not given education about how to use controversial issues in their university-based studies.

History teachers were also asked how they conceptualize controversial issues. 14 history teachers thought that controversial issues are political and ideological ideas based on controversy. One teacher stated that "Controversial issues are those that cause political and ideological debate, because people can have different perceptions about different events. For example, the Armenian issue is a controversial issue. We do not accept their claims regarding the emigration that took place in 1915". Another teacher made a similar explanation: "People have different ideas on a topic. For example, some people have a different evaluation about the revolution that took place in the period of Atatürk". Turkish teachers associated the controversial mainly with political and ideological topics in history. Six teachers did not answer this question. The reason for this could be hesitation, because they might have had different ideas that contradict those of their colleagues and the wider public. In the light of the above responses, it seems that history teachers do not have detailed knowledge about controversial issues, and they limited their understanding of controversial mainly to political and ideological topics in history. One reason for this could be that the history curriculum is mainly based on political history in Turkey.

#### **4.2. The teaching of controversial issues in history lessons:**

History teachers were asked whether or not they used controversial issues in history lessons. In the light of the data, it seems that 16 history teachers did not use controversial issues in their history lessons. For example, one teacher said that "We are not required to teach controversial issues in history lessons. We teach history in the light of the history curriculum, which guides us". These answers indicate that there is no requirement for history teachers to teach controversial issues. Similar results can be seen in the study of Misco (2011). Another teacher added that "Using controversial issues in history lessons is difficult because there are students in classrooms who have different ideas about historical topics. For this reason, using controversial issues can bring about problems among students". On the other hand, four teachers said that they only mentioned controversial issues in history lessons. For example, one history teacher stated that "I just motioned Armenian and Cyprus issues in history lessons. I taught how these



issues have been politicized by imperial powers”.

The data also indicates that the majority of history teachers are in favour of teaching controversial issues in history lessons. 15 history teachers who participated in this research thought that controversial issues should be incorporated into history lessons in Turkish high schools because they believed that teaching controversial issues is among the best ways to reveal current problems in society and the world. One teacher stated that “I see controversial issues as important because we have to inform students about current problems, and teaching controversial issues is the best way of doing this. We just teach how problems have evolved in society”. Another teacher supported the above explanation: “We need to teach controversial issues in history lessons because students cannot recognize why people understand the event through different lenses”. On the other hand, five teachers thought that controversial issues should not be taught in history lessons. They believed that controversial issues are highly debatable and unreliable, and could confuse the minds of students. For this reason, they believed that historical events should be taught through the perspective of Turkish history. One teacher said: “We should not teach controversial issues in history lessons. We teach them in light of the Turkish perspective because we give true information regarding controversial issues to students”. Another teacher supported this explanation: “Information about controversial issues is not reliable, and students should not be taught misinformation in history lessons based on controversial issues”. These explanations show how history has been based on a positive perspective of Turkish history and the history curriculum. The teachers’ responses also indicate that the Turkish history curriculum does not contain multiple perspectives.

The data also indicates that school seems to be the best place to teach controversial issues, which is in line with Ho, Alviar-Martin, and Leviste (in press). 15 history teachers thought that students can be given scientific information in school because school is one of the most suitable places to do so. One of interviewees stated that “Controversial issues have to be used in history lessons in school because schools are the best place where controversial issues and topics can be taught. This is because in schools teachers can use the most reliable resources”. Another teacher made a similar statement, and stressed the importance of using controversial issues in schools: “Controversial issues have to be used in history lessons in school because schools are the best place where controversial topics are taught”. The data indicates that Turkish history teachers believe that knowledge of history taught to students in schools should be scientific.

### **4.3. Controversial issues in Turkish history education**

All history teachers stated that there are topics regarding controversial issues in Turkish history education and in textbooks. According to the teachers, some of these controversial topics are directly related to the history of the Turkish nation, and others are about the common history shared between Turks and other nations, such as Armenians and Greek Cypriots.

The majority of history teachers (15) thought that the most controversial topic in Turkish history concerns the reforms that took place in the era of Atatürk. For example, one teacher said, “The reform of Atatürk is the main controversial issue in history les-

sons because there is debate among students about this period". Another teacher added that "Some of the students think that the reforms of Atatürk damaged the rules of Islam in Turkish society. On the other hand, some students believe that these reforms are very important, and created modern Turkey". Besides this, more than half of the teachers (12) thought that the life of Atatürk is also controversial in history lessons, which is in line with the findings of Çiçek (2011). One teacher said that "Some students believe that Atatürk led a life based on Western values. For this reason, conservative students criticize his life". The reforms of Atatürk and his life have been on the agenda of Turkish historians and the public. There are different ideas about these topics, which shape the views of students in Turkish society before they go to school.

Other controversial topics in the Turkish history classroom are the military coups that took place in 1960 and 1980. 12 teachers believed that these topics are controversial in history lessons. One teacher stated that "the majority of students think that the military coups that took place in 1960 and 1980 destroyed democracy in Turkish society; on the other hand, some students support them". The views of teachers are also indicative of the views of Turkish society.

The data shows that other controversial issues in history lessons are related to Ottoman history, especially the life of the Ottoman sultans. 11 teachers said that the marriages of the Ottoman sultans are controversial because some students criticize these marriages. For instance, one teacher stated that "Some students think that marriages of the Ottoman sultans were not suitable for Islam and Turkish culture, whereas some others believe that their marriages were suitable for Islam and Turkish culture".

Another controversial topic, according to 11 history teachers, is the reign of one Ottoman sultan, Abdulhamid (1876-1908). Çiçek (2011) found similar results in his research. One teacher explained that "some students see Sultan Abdulhamid as a pro-Islamist and a religious leader because he tried to unite all Muslims under the flag of the Ottoman Empire. For this reason, conservative students like him, and they believe that he was one of the most important sultans of the empire. On the other hand, secular students see this sultan as oppressive".

According to 10 history teachers, another controversial issue regarding Ottoman history is the escape of the last sultan of the empire. One teacher said that "some conservative students do not believe that the last sultan of the empire had not cooperated with British during the Turkish independence war after the I. World War". Furthermore, history teachers thought that the following topics are controversial: secularism in Turkey (N\8), the last century of the Ottoman Empire (N\8) and the caliphate (N\8). All these issues have also been controversial among the Turkish public, and people and some historians have different ideas regarding these topics.

The data signified that the Turkish history teachers thought that some historical topics regarding Turks and their relations with other nations are also controversial. 17 history teachers believed that the most important controversial topic were the claims of Armenians in terms of their common history with Turks and other nations, which is line with Çiçek's findings (2011). One teacher said: "I think the most important controversial topic is the Armenian issue, because Turks and Armenians have different ideas about

the emigration which took place in 1915. We believe that it was emigration during the I. World War". Another teacher supported this view, and stated that the "Armenian issue is the most controversial topic between Turks and Armenians. Although Armenians claim that there was genocide in 1915, we do not accept this because Armenian terrorists supported the Russian army and fought against the Ottoman army during the I. World War. Besides this, these terrorists killed many Muslim civilians during this period. For this reason, the Ottoman government relocated Armenians to Syria, and during the relocation process some Armenians died, which cannot be called genocide". Another teacher made a similar statement: that the "Armenian issue is controversial, but we do not accept their claims, and our students also do not accept their claims. This issue is a political issue between Turkey and other countries. Our history curriculum and textbooks explain what happened in 1915". These explanations indicate the views of the majority of Turkish society about the Armenian issue.

Another of the most important controversial issues in the eyes of the 17 Turkish history teachers is the Cyprus issue. One teacher said that the "Cyprus issue is also controversial between Turks and Greeks and Greek Cypriots. We do not have agreement with them on this issue. We teach this issue in the light of our perspective in history lessons". Another teacher made a similar statement: "We do not accept Greek Cypriots' claims on this issue, and we teach this topic in light of the Turkish history curriculum". Furthermore, the membership process of the EU (N\11) and the exchange of Turkish and Greek people in 1924 (N\10) are also seen as controversial.

The data also indicates that the Turkish history teachers believed that some controversial issues should be given priority in teaching history: the Armenian issue (N\12), the Cyprus issue (N\10) and the regnal system in the Ottoman Empire (N\10). One history teacher stated that the "Armenian and Cyprus issues are important, and we have to teach these topics in detail because the younger generation has to know what really happened in these issues". Another teacher made a similar statement, saying that "there are important topics such as the Armenian and Cyprus issues. As history teachers, it is our responsibility to teach controversial issues to students in the light of the history curriculum, because if we do not teach these topics in schools, students could be misinformed". At this point it should be noted that the above explanations show that some Turkish history teachers who participated this research did not really know what the controversial issues in history education are.

In sum, it can be said that teachers see certain topics, such as the reforms of Atatürk, the life of Atatürk, the Ottoman Empire and the military coups in Turkish history, as controversial. Furthermore, topics concerning the Armenian and Cyprus issues are also seen as controversial in the eyes of history teachers.

#### **4.4. Benefits of using controversial issues in history lessons**

As explained above, teaching controversial issues provides some crucial benefits to students. For this reason, history teachers should know what the benefits of teaching controversial issues are. In the light of the data, it seems that Turkish history teachers do not have an adequate knowledge of the benefits of using controversial issues in history education. 10 history teachers stated that using controversial issues helps students to

know past in detail and understand the problems of today. For example, one teacher explained that “Teaching controversial issues is important because students have a deep knowledge about events that took place in the past and so understand the conflicts in the present day”. Besides this, “controversial issues attract the interest of students about the past”. Furthermore, six history teachers thought that controversial issues develop the discussion skills of students. For instance, one teacher stated that “History as a teaching subject provides important skills to students. For example, the main benefits of history lessons are to support discussion skills. All history teachers should organize activities to develop discussion skills”. This explanation is in line with Hess (2002). Besides this, another three history teachers stated that controversial issues help students develop multiple perspectives. For example, one teacher said that “Multiperspectivity is very important in the 21st century, and citizens living in this century should develop multiperspectivity. One way of doing this is to teach controversial issues in history lessons”. The above explanations indicate that the history teachers who participated this study do not have adequate knowledge about how controversial issues can support history lessons, as explained above.

#### **4.5. Difficulties of using controversial issues in history lessons**

All history teachers who participated to this research thought that controversial issues are questionable and do not consist of reliable information. For this reason, teaching controversial issues in history lessons results in misleading conclusions, meaning that students could be misinformed about historical problems. For example, one teacher stated that “Using controversial issues in history education is a risky business because students might gain misleading information. Besides this, using controversial issues in history lessons may cause problems among students because teaching controversial issues which comprise unscientific information can lead to polarization and conflict in schools”. Another teacher stated that “Using controversial issues may cause breakdown in society and can cause enmity among students. Besides this, students who have different origins can be divided into opposing groups by way of controversial issues”. Four teachers also added that Turkey has some extremely controversial issues, such as the Sunni and Alevi conflict and other religious tensions, which are still very sensitive and pressing, and if controversial issues in history are taught in classrooms then problems could arise. This rationale indicates that history teachers think that teaching controversial issues seems to be a difficult and problematic task in Turkish high schools. The above explanations of teachers show that the history curriculum and history teaching in Turkey are still based on a nationalistic narrative, and history teachers are agreed upon this approach based on their own political and educational legacy.

Another important problem in using controversial issues in history lessons seems to be the Turkish history curriculum. All history teachers agree that teaching controversial issues in Turkish history lessons is difficult, because the history curriculum is not open for the teaching of controversial topics. In other words, all of the teachers stated that the history curriculum does not allow them to teach topics outside the curriculum, and they are expected to accept and implement the curriculum as it is. They pointed out that if they teach topics outside the curriculum, they can face significant problems. For example, one teacher said that “In Turkey, the curriculum is very important for us, and we have

to follow and teach the topics of the curriculum in history lessons. The Turkish history curriculum is not available to teach controversial issues; we just mention that there is conflict between two sides". Another teacher added that "We give historical information about how Armenian rebels revolted against the Ottoman Empire and killed thousands of civilians in different parts of Asia Minor during the 1. World War, and then how they were required to emigrate. Besides this, we also teach the present Armenian claims". Although more than half of the teachers believed that the Cyprus and Armenian issues are controversial, in the Turkish history curriculum they are not presented as controversial because there is not more than one perspective about these issues in the curriculum. In other words, these two issues remain controversy free during the history-teaching process in Turkish high schools. Students are just given historical information about how these issues occurred.

#### **4.6. Teaching strategies for using controversial issues in history lessons**

Those history teachers who want to use controversial issues in their lessons should know how to use them in history education. They should especially know the way to teach controversial issues. It seems that the great majority of teachers who participated in this study did not have enough knowledge and experience about teaching strategies to deal with controversial issues. 13 history teachers stated that they were not given information about this topic in the teacher-education process. For example, one teacher said that "We do not have enough information about how to use controversial issues in history lessons. Actually, we were not given any information about this issue in the education faculty. When I want to use a controversial issue, it should be objective. As a teaching method, discussion, questioning and answering can be used". 15 teachers also stated that the history curriculum does not require them to teach these issues, and for this reason they were not interested in what kinds of strategies are being using to teach controversial issues in history lessons. Another history teacher supported the above explanation, saying "We do not know how to use controversial issues in history lessons. Besides this, these issues are not mentioned in the Turkish history curriculum, and we are not required to teach controversial issues in history lessons". The above explanations indicate that the history teachers who participated in this study do not have either the education and/or the information about teaching strategies that can be used in the teaching of controversial issues.

### **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study investigated Turkish history teachers' views on the use of controversial issues in history lessons. In the light of the data, it seems that those teachers who participated in this study do not use controversial issues in history lessons in Turkey. However, it seems that the majority of Turkish history teachers have a positive approach to using controversial issues in history lessons. Although they think that controversial issues are important in history education, however, they do not use controversial issues in their lessons. Based on the findings of the semi-structured interviews, the major outcomes of this study can be summarized as follows. First, it seems that no history teachers were given education about how to use controversial issues in history lessons through university-based education and in-service education, findings which are in line with the results

of Harber and Serf (2006). Besides this, history teachers think that controversial issues are based on just political and ideological topics.

Second, the data indicates that majority of history teachers do not use controversial issues in their classrooms. Besides this, few history teachers even mention Armenian and Cyprus issues in their lessons. Furthermore, the majority of history teachers believe that using controversial issues can lead to problems in history lessons.

Third, the majority of history teachers accepted that the reforms of Atatürk, who founded modern Turkey, and the military coups that took place in 1960 and 1980, are important controversial topics in Turkish history, which is in line with the findings of Yılmaz (2012). Besides this, the Armenian deportation and Cyprus issues were seen as important topics regarding non-Turks in Turkish history, which is in line with the results of Çicek's research (2011).

Fourth, history teachers do not have adequate knowledge about the benefits of using controversial issues in history lessons. Half of the teachers believed that students are given knowledge of the past through using controversial issues in history lessons. Besides this, some of the teachers thought that using controversial issues develops discussion skills. These results are similar to the outcomes of Wasserman's research (2011).

Fifth, all history teachers thought that teaching controversial issues is a difficult and complex undertaking in history classrooms, findings which are in line with the results of other researchers who have studied teaching controversial issues (Davies, Gregory and Riley, 1999; Misco and Patterson, 2007; Hess, 2008). Turkish history teachers believe that using controversial issues in history could cause polarization and conflict in classrooms. Besides this, they do not use controversial issues in their lessons because the Turkish history curriculum does not require teachers to use controversial issues. And so they only mention the Armenian and Cyprus issues, which remain controversy free, during the history-teaching process in Turkish high schools. Students are just given historical information about how these issues occurred. Finally, the data shows that Turkish history teachers do not have adequate knowledge of what kinds of teaching strategies should be used in teaching controversial issues in history classrooms; nor do they have the skills to implement them.

The results of this particular study suggest that the following recommendations can be made.

- History teachers should be taught how controversial issues can be introduced into history lessons through in-service education.
- The Turkish history curriculum should contain topics concerning controversial issues.
- History teachers should be taught about the benefits of using controversial issues in history lessons through in-service education.
- History teachers should be taught what kinds of teaching approaches can be used in the teaching of controversial issues through in-service education.
- History student teachers should be given education about teaching

controversial issues in education faculties.

The contributions made by this study can be listed as follows. First of all, this research reveals the level of knowledge and competence of Turkish history teachers with regard to using controversial issues in history education and their attitudes towards them. In the light of the data, which shows that history teachers have some shortcomings in this area, it is evident that history teachers do not have enough education, knowledge or competence in how to use controversial issues in history lessons. Second, this study provides empirical data derived from the Turkish history teachers in Turkey that will help researchers, the Ministry of National Education, curriculum developers and history-teacher educators to increase the quality of history education through using controversial issues. Third, the results of this research give others the opportunity to make comparisons between and enrich the international literature about this topic. Fourth, this study offers some recommendations on how to include controversial issues in the Turkish history curriculum, drawn from the relevant literature and the outcomes of the study itself.

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