

# Conducting Democratic Evaluations where Democratic Principles are not always Practiced

Serhat Kurt  
*Ataturk University*

**Background:** Turkey is a fast-developing country facing a lot of different problems. One of the problems is inadequate education. A large project was started to improve Turkish elementary education. The project includes many different purposes from physical refurbishment of school buildings, to increasing technology use in education. The author of this paper carried out a democratic study to evaluate this project. This article reports on what was learned from this evaluation study conducted in Turkey.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to examine how democratic evaluations can be used to help understand the complex realities where undemocratic ideology has a long history.  
**Setting:** This evaluation study was conducted in an elementary school from a lower-middle class neighborhood.

**Intervention:** Not applicable.

**Research Design:** Qualitative method of inquiry was applied.

This paper discusses an evaluation study completed in Turkey. In this evaluation, I studied a project called the Basic Education Project (BEP). Turkey, with the help of the World Bank, had made an enormous investment in improving the quality of its elementary education. The BEP loan agreement was signed between the International Bank of Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) and the Turkish Government in

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The data mostly came from the interviews. However document analysis and observations were also conducted. Qualitative data from the interviews and observations were analyzed to interpret meaningful patterns or themes.

**Findings:** It was concluded that democratic evaluations can serve an important mission by informing the public when the public's role is limited in the decision making process. Further, democratic evaluators can serve as middle men who transfer information among the stakeholders, helping the evaluated program's or project's success. Finally, democratic evaluations can help increase democracy where democratic values are not always obeyed.

**Keywords:** *Democratic evaluation; Turkey; education; democracy; educational technology*

1998 and ended in 2007. This program was large and included many diverse objectives from physical refurbishment of school buildings, to reducing class sizes, to improving the quality of instruction and ultimately to improve Turkish elementary education.

BEP was also aimed at increasing technology use in education. Through this project, information and communication technology (ICT) classes had been

established. This evaluation study primarily focused on the technology part of the project. The main purpose of this study was to investigate factors that hinder or contribute to teachers' technology use in the elementary schools of Turkey. Further, this study investigated the nature and the effects of BEP using a democratic evaluation approach.

## Context: Turkey, Democracy and BEP

Since the establishment of the new Republic of Turkey in 1923 from the defeated Ottoman Empire after World War I, Turkey has been continuously trying to Westernize by adopting wide-ranging social, legal, economic and political reforms to improve its democracy. Turkey joined the UN (United Nations) in 1945. In 1952, Turkey became a member of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Turkey joined OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development) in 1960. In 1964, Turkey became an associate member of the European Community. Turkey has been recognized as a candidate country for the European Union (EU) membership since 1999; and membership negotiations started in 2005. Turkey is constantly trying to improve its democracy even though there have been three short-lived military interventions: 1960-1961; 1971-1973; and 1980-1983. In fact, as of now (December, 2009), there are continuous discussions regarding the military's recent (after 2000) unsuccessful coups attempts.

Since the establishment of The Turkish Republic, there have been a lot of major reforms. A common theme across these reforms is that an elite class decided on these changes. All of these changes were top-down and ignored the majority of

Turkish people. Ozdalga (1999) argues that many reforms in the Turkish Republic were top-down "for the people in spite of the people" (p. 15). BEP was another top-down change. The roots of BEP go back to the 1990s. In 1996, an Islamic party (the Virtue Party) won the elections and established the government. In Turkey, the Turkish military sees itself as the protector of the secularist Turkish republic. The military did not like the power of this Islamic party. On February 28, 1997, in the monthly National Security Council meeting between the government and the military, the military presented a proposal and forced the government to take actions against so-called fundamentalist Islamic movements. Right after this meeting, the Virtue party stepped down from government because of military pressure (two years later, the Virtue Party was closed by the Turkish National Court), and a new government was established. Many viewed this incident as a post-modern coup (CIA, 2006).

According to Ozdalga (1999), "The effect of the proposal as it was presented by the National Security Council was that the Imam-Hatip religious schools should be closed to children until they had completed their first eight years of ordinary education" (p. 6). Then suddenly in August, 1997, compulsory education was increased to eight years. Before this new compulsory law, in Turkey, there were primary schools (grades 1-5), middle schools (grades 6-8) and high schools (grades 9-11). There were also specialty high schools that had grades 5-11. Religious schools called Imam-Hatip were one of these specialty schools. They were very popular in Turkey. This new compulsory education law required the unification of middle schools and elementary schools. Students were

supposed to continue their eight years of education without leaving their primary school. Nobody in Turkey rejected the idea of 8-year compulsory education. Many supported the idea of a "5+3" formula, meaning students can change their school after primary school. "The crucial item in the list was the uninterrupted 8-year basic education school which in effect meant the closing of middle sections of the Imam-Hatip schools" (YOK, no date, no page). Then students in the high school part of the Imam-Hatip schools were prevented from entering university programs other than Theology in the same year. Ultimately, the Imam-Hatip high schools lost their popularity.

Ozdalga (1999) considers this compulsory education reform as another example of "for the people in spite of the people" (p. 15). She continues, "The Turkish people have been told that religion should not be used for political purposes. What about using basic education as a weapon in the struggle for political power" (p. 16). This is how BEP started; it provided financial support for this new compulsory education (World Bank, 2002), because unifying primary and middle schools with an uninterrupted education was a huge financial task. I was a teacher from 1998-1999. I experienced the chaos of this new law. Everything changed suddenly. The school where I taught started to teach grades 5-8. This meant the school needed more teachers and resources. Since no one provided these additional required resources, I, like many others, had to teach many different subjects; from Traffic Safety to English from grades 4-8.

Turkey is a very centralized country. By centralization, I mean that the government controls the whole country and makes major policy and

administrative decisions in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. For instance, in Turkey, Ministry of National Education (MONE) centrally appoints all teachers to the public schools. It is important to mention that 98% of schools and students and 96% of teachers are in the public schools (MONE, 2002). Because of the heavy centralization and undemocratic conditions, the Turkish public really does not know what the Turkish government is trying to do. The Turkish public is always far removed from the major decision making. In Turkey, general government elections are viewed as the only mechanism for the public to join in this decision making process. In education, parents' and school principals' and teachers' involvement in educational decisions is very limited. Many educational decisions, such as starting and implementing BEP, are made at the very top of the government. Thus teachers and principals are simply forced to follow the decisions.

Because Turkish education is heavily centralized; MONE controls everything. This makes MONE a very big organization with hundreds of thousands of employees. As a result, managing an organization of this size requires a bureaucracy. Even the education minister confessed that MONE is too complicated and slow. The minister further pointed out that even the most basic matters need approval from all bureaucratic levels and this causes great slowness and inefficiency (MONE, 2002). It is certain that heavy bureaucracy creates many unwanted results. For instance Gumuseli (1996) pointed out that heavy bureaucracy in Turkey reduces school principals' effectiveness and leadership. Arslan and Eraslan (2003) stated that heavy bureaucracy is one of the biggest obstacles of the Turkish education system.

Another important issue in Turkey worth mentioning is nationalism. Turkish nationalism is a strong force in Turkey, even though Turkey is a multicultural society. One of the basic principles of the Turkish Republic is nationalism, which was started and institutionalized by Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic. For example, some of Ataturk's famous nationalistic sayings are "one Turk equals the whole world" or "happy is the one who says, I'm a Turk". They are just two among many others. Ataturk opened many institutions to spread this ideology such as the National History Institute and the National Literature Institute.

The Turkish education system is influenced by strong nationalist views as well, and many minority cultural groups are ignored. Furthermore, there is no decision-making level between the Ministry of National Education in Ankara, the capital city of Turkey, and individual schools all over the country. Within the educational system of Turkey, where all stakeholders are not represented, it is very difficult to address all stakeholders' perspectives and values. In this context, doing a democratic evaluation was challenging, since democratic evaluation focuses on the bottom-up perspective. However, democratic evaluation is appropriate and perhaps required to identify, understand and address all the issues that practitioners are experiencing in Turkey's context. Furthermore, democratic evaluations can help us make the top-down hierarchical structure more democratic (Ryan, 2004).

## Democratic Evaluation

As stated above, even the start of BEP was very undemocratic. For this study, I decided to follow the principles of

democratic evaluation. Not only because democratic evaluation seemed to be the only fair way for everyone involved (e.g. teachers and principals); but also I did not want this study to be like previous studies that do not truly comprehend what is really going on from everybody's perspective but usually applaud the decision makers. I was also lucky to be an independent evaluator who had no contact or relations with the Government.

There are many definitions of democratic evaluation. For the purpose of this study, the definition of democratic evaluation was based on MacDonald's democratic evaluation approach. In MacDonald's democratic evaluation theory, "the basic value is an informed citizenry, and the evaluator acts as a broker in exchanges of information between groups who want knowledge of each other" (1976, p. 134). In MacDonald's evaluation approach, democratic evaluation offers a bottom-up perspective, serves those who lack power, and promotes the idea of the public's right to know. In democratic evaluation, the power authorities have no control over the evaluation. The evaluator is assigned the role of information broker and serves the public's right to know. One of the characteristics of MacDonald's democratic evaluation is that the evaluator must make the evaluation report accessible and understandable to the public. This is "intended to provide an opportunity for the public to engage in debate or deliberation about issues of interest and concern" (Ryan, 2004, p. 446).

To do this evaluation, I chose a school from a lower-middle class neighborhood for my research. Unlike in the US, upper-lower and lower-middle class constitutes by far the largest socio-economic class in Turkey. In this school, for instance, parents are mostly small business owners,

office workers and skilled and unskilled workers. One of the reasons I chose this school is that this school can represent the majority of Turkish elementary schools. In Turkey, many research studies in schools have been conducted in middle and upper class neighborhoods, and therefore their results can be misleading. For instance, I found a study regarding technology use in elementary schools. The study was completed in a public school in downtown Ankara. They found that teachers were successfully integrating technology into teaching. The school was a public school located in an upper-class neighborhood. I visited this same school when I was in Turkey. The school had diverse income sources that other schools do not have. For example, they were renting part of their playground as a car parking lot. Since the school was in downtown, their parking lot was very popular. Further, many students were from upper-class families, and their parents were helping the school financially. And lastly, all the teachers who were working at this school were significantly more experienced teachers.

In this study, I, as an independent knowledge broker, practiced the democratic evaluation principle of the public's right to know. Furthermore, I transferred knowledge among my stakeholders. The information I shared was not sensitive information that my subjects would not want me to share. Actually, they wanted me to share this information because they saw this evaluation as an opportunity to raise their voices to the decision makers. This information was also shared in the evaluation report I wrote. "We want MONE to listen to our problems" was said many times by the principal, vice-principals and teachers. For example, one principal stated that:

There is nobody to help us. When we have a question or a problem, we try to resolve it ourselves. When we visit MONE for school business or when MONE inspectors or someone from MONE visits our school, we ask them if they know anybody who can help us with these problems or can they tell whoever is responsible that we have these problems. But nothing really happens (Ms. Sebnem, Interview).

The schools in Turkey are unheard by MONE because of the heavy centralization and bureaucracy. This leads to poor communication among people involved in the project. Most of the time schools do not know what is going on regarding the changes that affect how their schools function. For instance, MONE gave me a list of BEP schools before I started my research. The list included some useful information such as dates of progress and number of computers to be installed. When I started visiting random schools from the list, the school principals had no idea what was going on. They knew that MONE would install a computer lab soon. They knew nothing else. In fact, the principals carefully examined the list I had in order to learn something. Similarly during my interviews with MONE and the World Bank representatives, I was often asked regarding each other's opinions about different issues related to the project. Therefore I believe a democratic evaluator can help improve the project success by increasing the communication among the stakeholders.

Therefore, in this study, I believe there were two important tasks that an evaluator should accomplish through evaluation studies in a context like this. The first one is the task of the information broker; to inform the public about what is going on. The second one, perhaps the more important one, is the task of being a middle-man. By middle man, I mean a

person who shares the ideas and opinions of stakeholders with other stakeholders; for instance, in this context, carrying teachers' opinions to a higher decision maker such as MONE or just informing them about BEP. As stated above, teachers want to be heard. This is essential because there are not many ways to accomplish this in heavily centralized countries under profound bureaucracy. This information sharing turned out to be very important because I experienced that stakeholders were also lacking essential information about the project itself and other stakeholders. For instance, teachers had no idea regarding the nature of BEP. In fact, all teachers stated they had never heard of BEP. Through this evaluation, teachers understood why newly established computer labs were brought and MONE representatives heard what teachers were thinking about using technology.

Mutual accountability is one of the democratic evaluation principles. Unlike many educational research studies in Turkey, in this research, I did not just hold schools accountable for the adoption of technology. In this study, I examined the perspectives, interests, concerns, and values of different stakeholders of technology implementation. In BEP, the key players were parents, teachers, school administrations, MONE and the World Bank as the sponsor of the project. I also examined the official BEP documents. In my findings, I included the views regarding BEP and the adoption of technology found in the official BEP documents, those of MONE and the World Bank representatives, and those of the teachers and school administration. That is why I tried to focus more on the school and its personnel. I believe democratic studies can be very helpful in countries like Turkey, where democratic

principles are not always practiced and where the voices of the field players are lacking in the decision making process.

Although democratic evaluations offer many benefits, many research studies documented the difficulties of conducting a democratic evaluation method, when doing research (e.g., Greene, 2000, Ryan & Johnson, 2000); and the most common challenge was to include all parties in the evaluation process and deal with existing power relations in the evaluation context. This problem was especially challenging to deal with in this evaluation, since, as I stated many times, Turkey is a heavily centralized country. This means that, for instance, teachers would be expected to be very careful about what they say regarding their principals and MONE ultimately. The only way to overcome this obstacle was to gain everyone's confidence and to assure them that their identities were protected and whatever they said would not be connected to them.

To gain the stakeholders confidence was very difficult. This was mainly because none of the stakeholders had experienced a true research study that not only requires obtaining consent letters from the subjects but also takes a lot of measure to protect its participants. Further, I was told by teachers and school principals alike that, previously, many researchers had come and given them a survey and a couple of days later came back to collect them. However I spent a lot of time with teachers and principals at this school almost every day from the time they opened to the time they closed during my research period, which was 8-10 hours a day. I was at this school for six weeks. Many times I was asked by the teachers and principals alike what I was still doing. I experienced the problems the school was having with teachers and

principals. This enabled the teachers and principals to trust me and this study.

The highest educational degree that the majority of parents of this school's students had was either middle school or primary school. Some were high school graduates and few were college graduates. Most of them had migrated from rural areas to find jobs in the city. Therefore, their technological knowledge was very limited. However, I believe, democratic evaluation can serve as an education mechanism or a change agent in countries like Turkey where the public's formal education is limited. Furthermore, as I stated, many reforms to improve education were introduced over short time periods. With this centralization, the role of the public does not exist. The public usually does not even know what is taking place. This evaluation study intended to serve the general public interest, including parents, by informing them.

## Conclusion

I examined technology use and BEP from different perspectives. The teacher's, the school principal's and vice-principals', and BEP representatives' perspectives were included to make this study more democratic. In my findings chapter, I presented the teachers' and the school administration's understanding of technology adoption. I further included the World Bank's and MONE's representatives' understanding of technology adoption and official BEP documents' descriptions of its purpose.

In Turkey, politics guides education. After every election, we see some changes in education (changes are usually laws and regulations) that are supposed to better our education system dramatically.

Politicians refer to these changes as big reforms and they say it is what we need desperately. In the end, nothing really changes. Research studies should guide educational decisions. However, it is important to mention that the number of educational research studies is limited. Furthermore, many of these research studies seem to be focusing more on quantitative problems. Most of the studies are ignoring school culture, diversity and the connections between the school and society. More independent research studies are required. I believe more qualitative research studies, democratic evaluations, case studies and action research inquiries should be conducted in countries similar to Turkey.

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