The Perceptions of Prospective Teachers about Democracy and Human Rights, and the Roles Laid by Them on Social Sciences Course on This Subject

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Abstract

The issue of democracy and human rights has started to become incrementally more important every passing day as of the early 20th century. The main purpose of this study is to reveal the perceptions of prospective social sciences teachers and primary school teachers about democracy and human rights, which is a highly important issue, and the roles laid by them on social sciences course in training democratic citizens that respect human rights.

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1. Introduction

The term “democracy” is Greek-origin. It combines the elements “demos” meaning people and “kratein” meaning rule or power (Schmidt, 2002, cited by Demir, 2010). The etymology of the word implies that democracy refers to meanings including power of people, rule of people, self-government of people, etc.

It is accepted that democracy firstly emerged in the Greek city-states. Democracy has been defined and criticized in different ways since its emergence. We learn the existence of democracy in the ancient Greek city-states from the works of important figures of that period, though it was not a democracy in the modern sense. What was meant by the word democracy in the Ancient Greek was the government of poor majority (Şahin, 2008). Distinctive feature of

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the Athens democracy was the general commitment to the virtue of citizenship, which referred to sacrifice of private life for public matters and common interest (Şahin, 2008).

Democracy was widely discussed among philosophers of that period. According to Plato, democracy is the least good form of government because it will most probably invest the mob with power. Thus, it may lead to tyranny - the worst form of government (Kuçuardi, 1998). To Aristotle, democracy is a deviation of politeia, which is the best form of government according to him. Democracy protects the interests of poor people, that is, only one part of the society. It does not protect common interest, as other deviant forms of public order do not (Kuçuardi, 1998).

Democracy has gone through many changes in terms of implementation since its emergence. Democratic governments were laid aside as Greek city-states came under domination of Macedonia in 322 BC. It took as long as 2000 years for democracy to re-appear.

Development, change, and transformation processes experienced in Europe as of the 15th century brought along a change in life styles of societies. This change was reflected in governments, too. Kings that ruled people and held absolute power in the middle age Europe considered the source of such power “divine and sacred right”. However, the period of change, which started to be experienced as of the 15th century as stated above, as well as the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Enlightenment movements taking place in the 19th century caused to question the status quo. Reflection of this situation in government was desert of source of rule from “the heavens” to “earth”. As nation states emerged and important steps were taken in regard to human rights, it started to be argued that source of government was societies, thus the individuals constituting these societies. Therefore, re-appearing in the 19th century, democracy began to develop and maturate thanks to various doctrines, liberalism being in the first place.

Women and workers, who made up an important part of the society, were not entitled to participate in the government in the early periods of re-appearance and implementation of democracy. Workers gained this right in the late 19th century while women gained it in 1928. General suffrage was not granted to women in Switzerland until 1971. In Turkey, women were provided with this right in 1935. It was not until the 1960s that black people in the southern states of the USA were entitled to vote (Heywood, 2006, cited by Şahin, 2008). This shows that democracy has been implemented in different societies in different periods and different ways.

Democracy is described as self-government of people. However, now people participate in the government through representatives, but not directly as in the classical democracy. In this order, people make a selection among the candidates who want to govern them through elections. In this way, they elect their representatives. Here, what is important is the approach adopted by the people coming into power through elections. For democracy to exist, the reason for existence of these people and the state must be to protect their citizens against one another, and govern the public in accordance with requirements of justice.

Democracy can be understood better when the state-society-individual relationship is examined. There are different ideas about what democracy is and what it requires. Robert Dahl set forth seven requirements for existence of democracy:

- Constitutionally elected bodies hold the power of control over government decisions in regard to state policy.
- Elected bodies must accede through frequently conducted and honestly managed elections where the pressure is relatively rare.
- In practice, all adults must be able to be elected for the bodies that are constituted through elections.
- Citizens must be able to freely express their opinions without any threat of punishment in regard to broadly defined political matters.
- Citizens must be able to access alternative sources of information.
- In practice, all adults must be entitled to vote in election of the bodies.
- Citizens must be able to form relatively independent bodies and organizations including independent political parties and interest groups (Diamond and Plattner, 1995, cited by Demir, 2010).

Based on the above-mentioned requirements, it can be said that democracy is directly associated with human rights. The issue of rights is among the basic principles of democracy, and is included in constitutions of democratic countries. Right is the concretized form of freedom (Demir, 2010).

The most comprehensive rights are human rights. Human rights are a whole of universal principles and rights which the human is the subject of just because s/he is a human being, and aim to protect and improve his/her personality and value in all aspects (Fırat, 2009). They are considered to be held by every individual regardless of
race, religion, language, etc.

The issue of human rights is a result of the changes taking place in Europe in the 19th century. The disorders and battles taking place before and after the French Revolution as well as the unrests stemming from the changes led by the Industrial Revolution paved the way for the Human Rights to be published as a declaration and gain importance. This issue has maintained its importance until today from 1789 in which the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was adopted, though it has been ignored in some periods or societies. Today, the strongest foundation of democracy is its feature as the form of government that can fulfill the Human Rights best.

The issue of democracy and human rights still survives and maintains its importance with its pros and cons. It is the individuals, the constituents of the societies, who form, develop, maturate, demolish or violate the emergent concepts of rights and forms of government such as democracy. Based on the fact that the most important instrument of shaping the society is education, thus the teachers providing such education, the present study examined the views of future teachers about democracy and human rights. These views will reflect the importance or perspective to be attributed to democracy by society in the future.

2. Method

Qualitative research design was adopted in this study, which aimed at revealing the perceptions of prospective social sciences teachers and primary school teachers about democracy and human rights, and the roles laid by them on social sciences course in training of democratic citizens that respect human rights. Semi-structured interview technique, which is frequently used and recommended to be used in qualitative studies, was used for data collection (Ekiz, 2009). Data collection instrument consisted of 10 open-ended questions. Interviews with participants were tape-recorded in order to contribute to reliability of the interviews by preventing possible loss of data (Perakyla, 1998). Then, the interviews were transcribed. Content analysis method was employed for data analysis in order to ensure in-depth and multi-dimensional analysis of the obtained data (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006). Participants were encoded rather than exposing their identities during data analysis. The answers of the participants are provided in the findings section. The codes of the participants are as follows: M1, M2, M3, M4, F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, and F6. M stands for male students, and F stands for female students.

The research sample consists of final year students of Kastamonu University Faculty of Education Department of Social Sciences Teaching and Department of Primary School Teaching. Purposeful sampling method, which is mostly used in qualitative research, was used for choosing the participants (Patton, 1990; Weinberg, 2002). Five students were chosen from each one of the departments. Participation was based on voluntariness principle. Consent was obtained from students for interviews. It was emphasized that the interviews would be used only for the present study and they would not be subjected to scoring assessment of any kind. In addition, it was tried to create an environment where students would comfortably answer the questions by explaining that identities of the participants would be kept confidential.

3. Findings and Interpretation

3.1. Perceptions of Prospective Teachers about Democracy

When the answers given by prospective social sciences teachers included in the study to the question, “What does democracy mean to you?” are examined, they are seen to focus on issues such as right to elect and be elected, self-government of people, and freedom of expression. For example, the answer of F4 to this question is as follows: “it means an individual’s having a voice in the government, even if partly. Democracy means exercise of right to elect and be elected, and making a selection. It requires individuals to be mature in terms of age and mental development”. M3 focused on equality and freedom by giving the following answer: “democracy means self-government of people for people. It is the most important form of approach to prevent violations of equality, rights, and freedoms.” The answer of F2 is as follows: “democratic environment refers to the environment where people can express what they think, want, and feel within the framework of their personal freedom without encountering any limitation, and equality and freedom are accepted as building blocks”.
Common content in the answers given to the question, “What are sine qua nons of democracy in a society or country?” is equality, freedom, non-discrimination, justice, and non-pressure. The answer of F6 to this question is: “if a country is governed by democracy, freedom and justice must be the basic principles of that country. Being always open to different ideas, needs, and decisions, and accepting superiority and majority are currently the musts of democracy.” For this question, F4 gave the answer, “if a country is governed by democracy, people must be educated in this matter. If the country is democratic, common needs of people must be fulfilled rather than needs of the majority. Sine qua nons of democracy are an educated society and a particular level of developedness.” As is understood, elements such as education, freedom, and justice are perceived as musts of democracy. It is noteworthy that especially education and developedness are considered requirements of democracy. Considering also the answers given by other students, requirements of democracy can be indicated in a table as follows:

| Requirements of Democracy |
|---------------------------|
| Equality                  |
| Freedom                   |
| Right to elect and be elected |
| Protection of rights      |
| Non-discrimination        |
| Social state approach     |
| Justice                   |
| Free will                 |
| Right to communicate      |
| Educated society          |
| Minority having a voice   |

In regard to the question, “Is democracy a strength, or weakness? Why?” most of the prospective teachers emphasized that it depended on the environment and social structure. Some of the students think it is a strength. The answer of F5 is as follows: “democracy is a strength in some conditions, but a weakness in some others. Democracy is a strength in terms of form of government. Government of the country by democracy is an advantage. On the other hand, it is a weakness. This is because; it can be exploited by society or the people exercising the democratic power.” M4 gave the answer, “democracy is a strength. Countries with a strong democratic power can use it in the international arena, too. The power provided by democracy allows having more to say in the world”. Comments of F1 are also noteworthy: “for me, democracy is a strength. One who uses democracy and has the majority holds the power. However, this power is against and contradicts with the nature of democracy. In other words, we should look at how the party that holds the majority and strengthens approaches the minority. If the minority is suppressed, squelched, and disregarded, it means that democracy is considered a strength for the ruler. However, it is a weakness from the perspective of minority”. As is understood, it is emphasized by the students that governments coming into power by democracy must treat equally to all individuals regardless of who voted or who did not vote for them.

Different answers were given to the question, “Do you think democracy is the best form of government? Can democracy be abandoned?” that was asked based on the fact that democracy is one of the much-debated issues at the present time. The prospective teachers focusing on expendability of democracy emphasized the need for emergence of a better form of government in order to abandon democracy. The answer of F5 in this matter is as follows: “yes, it can be abandoned. Democracy was adopted in place of absolute monarchy, so it is possible to adopt another form of government in place of democracy, too. However, certain difficulties may be experienced within this process.” M4 gave the answer, “At the present time, democracy is the best form of government. Today, democracy is the optimum source of living for people. However, it can be abandoned if a better form of government appears”. M1 has a slightly different approach to this matter. To him, “democracy is not good for government of a country. There is nothing indispensable. It may lead to serious delays in decisions to be made on behalf of government. What is more, certain harmful ideas, which are firstly considered beneficial, come into force, thus a mass of inextricable problems loudly laughs at us”. 
3.1.1. Perceptions of Prospective Teachers about Human Rights

We asked students the question, “What does human rights mean to you?” in order to reveal perceptions and understandings of prospective teachers about human rights, which are closely associated with democracy. Students focused on right to life, personal immunity, education, health, and right to communicate. F6 told, “a person has natural and acquired rights just because s/he is a human being. The most fundamental one is right to life. No one can deprive another person of this right”. M3 answered the question as follows: “Human rights are natural or acquired richness of human beings. These rights enable people to fulfill certain freedoms in the society”. Based on the answers to this question, the following table can be formed:

| Human Rights                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------|
| Natural rights and acquired rights               |
| Right to life                                    |
| Right to education                               |
| Right to health                                  |
| Freedom                                          |
| Right to thought and expression                  |
| Right to communicate                             |

The question, “Can you please define the relationship between human rights and democracy” was asked to the prospective teachers in order to learn their views about the link between democracy and human rights. F5 gave the answer, “these are inseparable concepts. Human rights automatically exist in the place where democracy is adopted.” F6 attempted to highlight the importance of society, thus individuals in democracy by saying, “there is a particular order in democratic societies where everything is done for public. Even the interests of state require this approach in democratic societies.”

The question, “what kind of characteristics is a democratic individual that respects human rights required to have?” was asked to prospective teachers. The answers, which were given in items, can be indicated as follows:

| Democratic individual that respects human rights |
|------------------------------------------------|
| Awareness of one’s own rights                   |
| Being open to ideas                             |
| Knowing well the requirements of democracy      |
| Human love and respect                          |
| Non-discrimination                              |
| Attaching importance to personal development    |
| Awareness of limits of one’s own freedom        |
| Not keeping still against injustices            |
| Fairness                                        |
| Protecting right to education                   |
| Tolerance                                       |
| Empathy                                         |
| Being open to criticism                         |

The education of human rights and democracy is not less important than knowing these concepts. In this sense, the approaches of teachers, who give the education of human rights and democracy, are highly significant. The education of democracy and human rights has been focused on in the last quarter century. It has been discussed how people should be educated about democracy and human rights and what kind of methods can be used in this education. In this regard, the question “How can we train individuals that respect human rights and democracy?” was asked to the prospective teachers. Common focal point of the answers was the importance of practices and model behaviors in the society besides that this education started in the family and continued at school. The approach of M3 was as follows: “Education firstly starts in the family, which is the smallest social institution.
Families can bring up their children as individuals respecting human rights and democracy by educating them in this direction. However, families should adopt these concepts themselves before teaching them to their children”. Regarding the education in family, F4 said, “First of all, families should listen to the ideas of their children about the issues concerning them. Then, the children should be taught that others can also have ideas about their situations and they should listen to these people, too”. Giving the answer, “social structures of the states governed by democracy and those of the states not governed by democracy should be compared in the classroom environment”, M2 tried to express that students could be affected by comparison of democratic and non-democratic societies, and would understand the value of democracy better.

It is a known fact that democracy and human rights are violated in some democratic or non-democratic societies, and the people committing such violations often argue that what they do is legitimate. The question, “Are there any obstacles in front of democracy and human rights in today’s world? If any, can you please describe it?” was asked to the prospective teachers considering different ways of implementation of democracy and need for certain external interventions for some countries to attain a democratic government. Most of the prospective students answering this question argued that there were some obstacles in front of democracy and human rights including interests and utilitarianism. F1 expressed that interests were the obstacles in front of the democracy by giving the answer, “I think there is no country implementing, adopting, and trusting in democracy in every sense in today’s world. The biggest obstacle in front of democracy is the conflict of interest between states, nations, and people in the world”. M3 indicated the obstacles in front of democracy as follows: “oppressive regimes; economic interests; certain religious rules and life styles of the society; thoughts, plans, and activities of countries about one another”. On this subject, M4 said, “forms of government, beliefs, and loyalties can cause formation of an environment that restricts and prevents democracy and human rights. In addition, elements such as customs, traditions, and external dependence can be regarded as obstacles in front of democracy”.

3.1.1.1. The Views of Prospective Teachers about Social Sciences Course in the Context of Democracy and Human Rights

Finally, the students were asked the importance of social sciences course, which they studied in terms of democracy and human rights and would teach in the future, for democracy and human rights. To this question, M3 gave the answer, “social sciences course has a content that contributes to social and cultural development of people. Some of the information provided within the scope of the social sciences course is about democracy and human rights. In this regard, this course is of great importance. Social sciences course should be able to raise democratic consciousness of individuals, and reinforce the respect for human rights among the individuals”. Another student said, “social sciences course prepares students for future by receiving support from past. We learn the beginning of democracy and human rights thanks to social sciences course. The subject of democracy and human rights should have a wide coverage in the social sciences course”. In fact, the answers to this question were about the importance of social sciences course, but not about how it should be. The points agreed by all students were that social sciences course is closely related to democracy and human rights, that democracy and human rights should have a wider coverage in this course, and the teachers teaching this course should serve as a model by standing out as a democratic person respecting human rights.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Democracy and human rights emerged almost in the same period. What is meant by democracy here surely is not the position of democracy in the ancient Greek city-states. The 18th century is quite important for these two concepts. The said two concepts have been the subjects of many discussions both as a concept and in terms of way of implementation since their emergence. They have increased their importance and power every passing day, which can be clearly seen from the current struggles in the context of democracy and human rights.

In today’s world where there are so many struggles for democracy and human rights, the question should be, “Why are democracy and human rights discussed every day; what are the effects of these discussions?” Aiming to find an answer to this question, the present study proved us right. Democracy is considered a good form of government, but still there is a search and expectancy for an alternative form of government. In particular, the
societies that have not adopted democracy yet and the sanctions ignoring human rights in this regard require rethinking on these two concepts. Interventions made in the societies that are foreign to these concepts under the name of democracy for different purposes harm genuine meanings of these two concepts fundamentally. Though this harm is sometimes temporary, it becomes permanent and causes emergence of opposing groups at other times.

The answers of prospective teachers show the existence of the consensus that democracy is the best form of government in any case. It is associated with human rights. However, it is emphasized that certain interests are the biggest obstacles in front of democracy and human rights. As a matter of fact, one of the major stumbling blocks in front of democracy is that those who use democracy and human rights as an instrument for their benefits and gain power by this means exploit this power to oppress the minority later on. In addition, some prospective teachers have really attention-grabbing views that another form of government can replace democracy, and democracy is definitely not a good form of government. This shows that the outlook on democracy goes towards a negative direction at the present time. The causes and background of this situation should be investigated.

Another factor found at the end of the interviews is the interrelation between democracy and economy. Prospective teachers think that the rise in welfare level of the societies strengthens democracy more and increases the demand for democracy. In addition, they state that economic welfare will increase in the societies where democracy is properly implemented. In other words, there is a two-way interaction between democracy and economic welfare.

Prospective teachers did not focus on democratic culture. However, development and maturation of the concepts of democracy and human rights, which started to gain strength as of the 19th century, has a background. Development period of these two concepts is easily noticed in the history of Europe, which is the motherland of these two concepts. However, the eastern world got acquainted with these concepts late. As a result, desire for experiencing a rapid development process led to certain factions and adversities. The situation is more desperate for societies that have not adopted democracy yet. It is getting more and more difficult to keep societies like a closed book at the present time where information and technology is highly advanced. The said advanced technology enables individuals in such societies to see practices, forms of government, and life styles in different parts of the world, which arises the desire for a more comfortable and free social order where individuals have certain rights. These intense desires bring about unrest in the society, and cause governments to be replaced by force. Although this is a positive development from the perspective of democracy and human rights, its benefits for the relevant countries and societies are open to argument.

The issue of democracy and human rights will continue to be discuss in the future, as it has been from past to present. The most important point to be emphasized in this matter is that these concepts have introduced important changes and developments to human life. People who were considered to have no right at one time gained their rights thanks to these concepts. Thus, democracy and human rights need to be strengthened more to the benefit of people every passing day. It is also emphasized that these two concepts are closely associated. It is stated that although the importance of democracy for human rights has been understood, certain interest groups play an impairing role in this matter.

Education is the most important instrument for development and maturation of democracy and human rights. Societies can internalize these concepts only by going through a democratic educational process that values human being. The most influential people at the first stage of this educational process are firstly primary school teachers and then social sciences teachers. These two groups of teachers have important responsibilities in this regard. It is evident that social sciences course has a very important place for internalization of democracy and human rights, which makes up the common point of the answers given. Thus, education to be provided within the scope of this course is very important for these concepts to be understood and carried into future.

In conclusion, important tasks and responsibilities fall to individuals, societies, and states for development and internalization of democracy and human rights. The following recommendations can be made for strengthening democracy and human rights:

- An effective educational process should be organized on the subject of democracy and human rights.
- Awareness about democracy and human rights should be introduced to all segments of the society, families being in the first place.
- Democracy and human rights should go beyond well-defined concepts in books, and be put into action.
- Educational levels of individuals in the societies that have got acquainted with these concepts recently or late should be raised.
- The history of democracy and human rights should be conveyed to all individuals, students being in the first place, very well. In this way, the process may be accelerated by taking lessons from the errors made on this.
- Since social sciences course is the first stage in teaching of the subjects of democracy and human rights, these concepts should have a wide coverage in social sciences course books based on the philosophy, “as the twig is bent, so grows the tree”.
- Primary school teachers and social sciences teachers should serve as a model with their democratic behaviors that respect human rights.
- Courses should be conducted in a more democratic way, and subjects about democracy and human rights should be concretized.

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