

# Using Historical Stories to Teach Tolerance: The Experiences of Turkish Eighth-Grade Students

ISMAIL H. DEMIRCIOGLU

**ABSTRACT.** This study's primary purpose is to investigate the ways in which eighth-grade students responded to a story told to them in a history lesson, which was intended to teach them tolerance. The author used a qualitative approach to gather data in this study. First, he researched the literature dealing with the importance of storytelling in education. Second, he used a semistructured interview to elicit the attitudes of twenty randomly chosen eighth-grade students, both toward the story itself and toward the activities based on the story. The author conducted the research in May 2005 in a primary school in the city of Trabzon, Turkey. The compiled data revealed the following results: the use of stories can make history lessons interesting and enjoyable; by listening to this story, students recognized that people with different religions and ethnicities can live together peacefully; the story influenced students' ideas about people from different cultural backgrounds in a positive way; and students recognized that

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tolerance is important if people are to live together.

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Stories are important tools in all human societies because they address many of the most important aspects of human life. They are an inherent part of people's cultures (De Young and Monroe 1996); they inform us about our past, support our present, and shape our futures (Harris 2007). Stories, both real and imaginary, can also be used at different educational levels and are thus important as literature and pedagogical tools. Educators can use stories to teach factual information, explore cultural values, and help students develop their own values. In addition, through stories, knowledge of the distant past and examinations of cultural myths and legends can all be introduced into history courses (Brooks, Aris, and Brooks 1993). It should also be noted that storied thinking is a central tool in history education (Husbands 1996). Considering all of this, it is obvious that stories have an important role to play in the teaching of history. To teach history effectively, history teachers should recognize the importance of stories and learn how to use them in their courses.

History is an abstract subject, and some history teachers teach it in a traditional way. Because of this, some students find history difficult to learn, and to them it is a boring subject. However, to make history more immediate and enjoyable, history teachers can use a range of activities and take a number of different approaches to teaching in their classrooms, one of which is using stories. Stories can provide students with crucial skills and information. Some of the benefits of stories include arousing curiosity; stimulating children's historical imaginations; making links between children's experiences and the past; encouraging children to recognize continuity and change, similarity and difference; helping children to recognize cause and effect; encouraging children to see different points of view; helping children recognize differences between fictional and real characters; encouraging children to use evidence; and developing children's decision-making skills (Bettleheim 1975; Brooks, Aris, and Brooks 1993; Coxall and Howe 1992; Goodwin and Jenkins 1997; Halford and Sheehan 1991; Phillips 2003).

These benefits, all of which help teachers bring history to life and hence make it more understandable, are crucially

important if children are to learn history effectively. One of the important responsibilities of history educators is to promote students' thinking and problem-solving skills. Stories can be used to support this, encouraging students to become more effective thinkers and problem solvers.

### Story Analysis

One way to use stories in history and social studies courses is through the analysis of a story, an activity that can make the classes more interesting and increase students' motivation. Through analyzing stories, students can examine different facts, views, actions, and social and historical events. Students can also discover how and why characters in a story behave as they do. Furthermore, students can recognize how characters solve problems, or think about why problems remain unsolved (Rowe and Newton 1994). Story analysis is an important activity that encourages students to demonstrate higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This activity helps students develop their thinking and problem-solving skills, which are crucial for the wellbeing of a democratic society.

There are three important approaches to analyzing stories: moral/ethical analysis, intellectual analysis, and emotional analysis (Rowe and Newton 1994). These approaches are described in the following sections.

#### *Moral/Ethical Analysis*

After they have heard the story in the classroom, students are required to analyze the story's moral and ethical elements and then express their findings. Students analyze stories in terms of the moral/ethical questions they raise by asking questions and by answering these questions. This exercise's main purpose is to give students an opportunity to encounter moral/ethical questions and develop their own values (Kabapinar 2003).

#### *Intellectual Analysis*

Students are expected to analyze the story in intellectual terms. In this pro-

cess, students analyze characters' ideas and actions for their logical consistency and examine each story's main concepts in detail through questioning designed to illuminate the characters and their motives. The concepts, which are generally abstract, can be made concrete by events that occur in the story (Kabapinar 2003). This exercise's main purpose is to give the students an opportunity to analyze ideas, actions, and concepts in an abstract way.

#### *Emotional Analysis*

Students are expected to analyze the story in emotional terms. As a result, they should recognize how their behavior may affect other people. Through emotional analysis, students can learn how to understand other people's emotions. As a consequence of emotional analysis, it is hoped that students can become more tolerant of others and learn how to communicate with them more easily. Emotional analysis provides students with certain skills crucial to their social lives.

### **Theory into Practice: Practical Suggestions for Using Stories in History and Social Studies Courses**

Although stories make history classes more interesting and provide students with important knowledge and skills, teachers need to know how to use stories in their courses. This section contains some practical suggestions for how to introduce stories into the classroom.

#### *Activities to Do before Using Stories*

- Prepare teaching objectives (Demircioglu 2005).
- Select or prepare a suitable story that is both interesting and clearly linked to the teaching objectives (Demircioglu 2005).
- Choose or prepare a story that is age appropriate (Demircioglu 2005; Farmer and Knight 1995).
- Determine whether the whole story or only a certain part of the story will be used (Demircioglu 2005; Farmer and Knight 1995).

- Establish the main characters in the story (Coxall and Howe 1992).
- Establish the main concepts in the story (Coxall and Howe 1992; Farmer and Knight 1995).
- Tell the students about the story (Coxall and Howe 1992).
- Determine what kinds of teaching strategies will be used during and after storytelling (Demircioglu 2005).
- Determine what kinds of materials can be used to supplement the story (such as visual materials and other objects relating to the story; Coxall and Howe 1992; Demircioglu 2005).
- Prepare a worksheet to accompany the story (Coxall and Howe 1992; Demircioglu 2005; Farmer and Knight 1995).

#### *Activities to Do during the Storytelling Session*

- Make an interesting presentation that introduces the story and motivates students.
- Introduce the main characters.
- Explain the main concepts of the story.
- Use humor during the telling of the story (Farmer and Knight 1995).
- Breathe life into the different characters.
- Make sure there is good interaction with the students during the storytelling.
- Give the students the opportunity to ask questions.
- Give the students the opportunity to analyze the story.

#### *Activities to Do after the Storytelling Session*

- Ask questions to ascertain if students have achieved the teaching objectives.
- Carry out follow-up activities to consolidate the information and skills gained by the students.
- Ask students to retell the story.
- Ask students to give animated renditions of the main characters.
- If some part of the story was incomplete, ask students to complete it.
- Ask students to make pictures based on the story.

## Methods for the Current Study: Research Context, Participants, and Data Collection

This study's purpose was to investigate the attitudes of eighth-grade students toward a story used in a history class to teach tolerance. I used a qualitative approach to gather data. First, I researched the relevant scholarly literature regarding the importance of story in education and how stories should be used in education classes. Second, I conducted semistructured interviews to elicit information about student attitudes toward stories and activities based on the stories. It is possible to gain a wealth of information from students through the interview process alone (Bell 1997; Cohen and Manion 1997). The research took place in a primary school in the city of Trabzon, Turkey, in May 2005. A social studies teacher narrated a historical story in a class designed to teach tolerance to eighth-grade students. After the exercise, twenty students were selected to be interviewed through a random sampling method, and they participated in a semistructured interview. In this study the data-collection tool was the semistructured interview used to discover the students' attitudes.

I used relevant literature and took expert advice in preparing the interviews. In addition, during the development process, I took into account the use of appropriate language and clear wording and was mindful to avoid using leading questions, all of which are important for a researcher if he or she is to attain his or her goals (Drever 1997). After preparing the interview schedules, the second step was to set up a pilot study, which was carried out before conducting the interviews. The pilot study was intended to highlight potential problems with the interviews, and I submitted it to ten student teachers for their evaluation. In light of their comments, minor amendments were made to the questions.

During the analysis of the semistructured interviews, I listened to each tape and read the accompanying transcriptions several times. I summarized the responses to the semistructured questions and classified them into specific

categories of answers to create a systematic analysis of the data.

### Procedures for Analyzing the Story

The lesson's purpose was to require eighth-grade students, who were all Muslims, to think about tolerance. In particular, I hoped the story session might increase these eighth-grade stu-

story (see appendix B), and it was used in the story analysis. The following procedures were used in this research.

#### *Introductory Activity*

In this phase, the teacher used pictures, sounds, and video images relating to the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. These materials mainly concerned the

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dents' tolerance toward people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. *Tolerance*, for the purposes of this study at least, can be defined as "respecting and learning from others, valuing others, bridging cultural gaps, rejecting unfair stereotypes, discovering common ground and creating new bonds" (Kids Health for Parents 2004). The teacher used a historical story I wrote (see appendix A) to teach tolerance to the students. During the nineteenth century, Istanbul was the capital of the Ottoman Empire, and people from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds lived together peacefully. There are many stories from Ottoman history that tell us that people lived together in peace for a long time, and that they demonstrated tolerance for one another. These stories are valuable resources that can be used to teach tolerance to students in social studies and history lessons. Social studies and history teachers can also develop their own stories, based on real events, that reveal the tolerance of people in the past for those of different religious and ethnic backgrounds. In the story used for this study, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish people were all living in the same district of Istanbul in the nineteenth century. In this district there were mosques, churches, and synagogues, yet people lived in peace and tolerated each other. I prepared a worksheet to accompany the

relationships between Muslims and Christians and were designed to motivate the students prior to the story's introduction. At this point, the teacher handed out the story worksheet (see appendix B) to the students. Then he read the story aloud in the classroom. After reading the story, he distributed a photocopy of the story to the whole class and asked the students to read it. Next, the students were asked to form groups.

#### *Analysis of the Story*

In this phase, the teacher first asked students to analyze the story and then to present the results of their analysis. He also asked them to present their views about the story's moral/ethical, intellectual, and empathic elements.

#### *Presentation and Comparison of Each Group's Worksheet Results*

After analyzing the story, the teacher asked the students to fill out the worksheet that he had prepared to accompany the lesson. Also during this phase, students presented and compared their worksheet results.

#### *Class Discussion*

After a comparison of the worksheet results, the students had a class

discussion to compare the similarities and differences of their results. In addition, they discussed what kinds of lessons they drew from the story, and how these lessons might be implemented in the real world.

### **Comparison of a Story-Based History Lesson and an Ordinary History Lesson in Turkey**

At this point, it would be useful to explain how a story-based history lesson differs from how history is usually taught in Turkey. In Turkey, history is generally taught in a traditional way, and teachers usually do not use varied teaching activities in their lessons (Demircioglu 2005; Ozbaran 1998). Lecturing is considered the primary teaching activity, and students are not usually given the opportunity to ask questions. Students are also expected to memorize names, places, and dates. One of the primary purposes of history teaching is to teach Turkish history to students. Besides this, students are expected to acquire cultural and patriotic values from their history lessons. Traditional teaching of history in Turkey does not encourage students to develop higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills, which are crucial in a democratic society.

The story-based lesson is different from traditional lessons because teachers use different materials and different approaches. This has a dramatic impact on student response. First, the pictures, sounds, and storytelling engage their interest. Second, they are encouraged to engage with the materials in an active way. Consequently, they learn to use higher-order thinking skills, such as evaluation, analysis, and synthesis, all of which are crucial to the healthy working of a democratic society. Third, they use worksheets to present their ideas. Fourth, they discuss the results from their worksheets in their groups and reach some conclusions. In this process, they learn to support their ideas with evidence taken from the story. In story-based history lessons students are active and enthusiastic; furthermore, they gain knowledge and express their attitudes together in an active way.

### **Findings and Discussion**

I gathered a great deal of data from the student interviews (see appendix C) about their attitudes toward the storytelling exercise, but I only recorded those answers that had direct connections to the major objectives of this study. These main issues are as follows:

- The story made the history lesson interesting and enjoyable.
- People who have different religions and ethnicities can live together peacefully.
- The story changed students' ideas about people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds.
- Tolerance is important if we are to live together peacefully.

#### *Making the History Lesson Interesting and Enjoyable*

Stories are important tools in history education, and they can make history lessons interesting and enjoyable. In light of the data, it appeared that the great majority of students (85 percent) found the story interesting. One student said, "The story was very interesting for us. People who had different religious and ethnic backgrounds were living together in peace, and they were solving their problems peacefully. The history lesson was very enjoyable." Another student said, "This lesson was very interesting, not boring at all. Before we heard this story, I thought that history was the most boring lesson of all. But I recognized that history can be made interesting via stories."

These results indicate that history courses can be made more interesting and enjoyable by using stories, a finding that is in line with the recent literature on the subject. For this reason, teachers should choose and prepare appropriate stories and use them in history education.

#### *Learning That People from Different Religious and Ethnic Backgrounds Can Live Together Peacefully*

In history and social studies courses, students should be taught that people who have different religious and ethnic

backgrounds can live together peacefully. All twenty students in my study (100 percent) stated they understood that people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds can live together peacefully. Clearly, this study shows that stories can be used to teach tolerance to students. The following are just two student responses to the issue: "In the story, we saw that people were living together peacefully in the same district. That's great, because today people fight each other over religion and ethnicity. Through stories, we can be taught peace and tolerance in schools." Another student said, "The story was nice. There are peace and tolerance in the story. Before, I had different ideas about people who are not Muslims, but in the story I saw that people who have different religions can live together peacefully, and can help each other and solve problems together."

The story seemed to teach the students that people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds can live together peacefully. One of education's main aims should be to promote peace and tolerance.

#### *Changing Ideas about People from Different Religious and Ethnic Backgrounds*

The data reveal that sixteen students (80 percent) experienced a positive change in their ideas about people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. In particular, students developed more positive attitudes toward Christians and Jews after hearing the story. One student said,

I had negative ideas about anyone who was not Turkish and Muslim before I heard this story. In the story, non-Muslims had good relationships with Muslims, and they all lived together in the same district and helped each other out. This study changed my attitudes about Christians and Jews.

Another student said,

We generally had been taught that we had problems with people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. We knew that there had been wars with other nations, and especially with Christians.

This story was different, and in it we saw examples of peace and tolerance, and I partly changed my ideas about Christians because of it.

### *Learning That Tolerance Is Important If We Are to Live Together Peacefully*

“Tolerance means respecting and learning from others, valuing differences, bridging cultural gaps, rejecting unfair stereotypes, discovering common ground, and creating new bonds” (KidsHealth for Parents 2004), and students should be taught tolerance in schools. In this study, the majority of students (85 percent) stated they recognized that tolerance is important in helping us to live together in peace. According to one student,

In this study, I saw that people who have different values, or who come from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, were all living together and tolerated one another. I think that tolerance played an important role in helping them to live together. For this reason, tolerance is an important quality to help us all to live together.

Another student said,

I realized that tolerance is so important for helping us to live together. I think that, in this world, people need tolerance to live together peacefully. If students were taught about tolerance in schools, when they became adults they would then have more tolerance.

Based on the aforementioned results, it is clear that the eighth-grade students recognized the social importance of tolerance. Stories can help reduce conflicts between people of different backgrounds by teaching tolerance.

### **Conclusion**

Stories are important tools in history and social studies education. In history education in particular, teachers can use stories to make lessons more interesting and enjoyable. To use stories effectively, however, teachers must first recognize the importance of this pedagogical tool. They also need to understand how to use stories in the classroom. Stories can be used to teach important issues, such as toler-

ance, which are relevant to modern society. In this study, a story that took place in nineteenth-century Istanbul provided a lesson in tolerance relevant to several contemporary eighth-grade students. In the story, people from divergent cultural backgrounds were shown living together peacefully in the same district. It is clear from the research data that the eighth-grade Turkish students learned from the story, demonstrating its effectiveness as a pedagogical tool.

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### **APPENDIX A**

#### **SUMMARY OF THE STORY**

#### **Living Together in the District of Pera**

The story takes place in Pera, which is a district of Istanbul, in the nineteenth century. In Pera at this time, people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds lived together in peace and tolerance. Muslims, Christians, and Jews were neighbors, and their children all played together in the same place. People respected each other's religious and social values. They visited one another and gave each other presents at religious festivals. Furthermore, people of one religion would readily help the poor of a different religion. The chief Muslim imam (prayer leader), the priest, and the rabbi worked together to solve the district's problems. One day, the daughter of the priest married the son of the imam without the permission of their fathers, which led to problems between Muslims and Christians. The rabbi then got in touch with the imam and the priest and solved the problem, so that the two fathers came to accept the marriage. In the end, a big wedding was held for the Muslim boy and the Christian girl, and all the people of the district came to the wedding in peace.

### **APPENDIX B**

#### **STORY WORKSHEETS**

#### **Characters in the Story**

1. Who are the main characters in the story?
2. What are the names of the characters in the story?
3. What are the ethnic origins of the characters in the story?
4. What are the religions of the characters in the story?

5. What are the occupations of the characters in the story?
6. Who is the most important character in the story, and why?

### Story Setting

1. When and where does the story take place?
2. Do you have any information about the religion and ethnicity of the main characters in the story?
3. Do you think the place in which the story took place is a multicultural society? Can you give your reasons?

### Moral/Ethical Analysis

1. What do you think of the behaviors of the main characters who have divergent religious and ethnic backgrounds in the story?
2. Do you think the behaviors of these char-

acters are true or false? Can you provide reasons?

### Intellectual Analysis

1. Examine the ideas of the main characters.
2. Examine and try to explain the main concepts in the story.
3. Do you think the characters that are of different ethnic and religious backgrounds have tolerance for each other?
4. Do you think the ideas of the main characters are logical and consistent? Can you write down your reasons?
5. What events and problems occur in the story?
6. How are the problems solved in the story?
7. If the main characters of the story did not have tolerance, what would happen?

### Emotional Analysis

1. Could you put yourselves in the place of the main characters in the story?

2. Try to feel the emotions of the main characters of the story, and write them down.

### Lessons from the Story

1. What is the message or messages of the story?
2. What is the importance of tolerance between people who have different ethnic and religious backgrounds?
3. How can these ideas be used in real life?

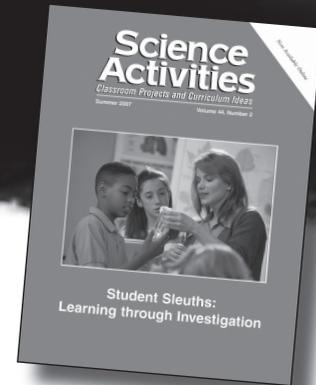
## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about using stories in history courses?
2. What did you learn from the story?
3. Do you think people who have different religions and ethnic origins can live together?
4. Have your ideas changed about people who are from different religious and ethnic backgrounds?

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