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How Do Different Ethnicities Approach to the Education System and Differences in Turkey?¹

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to find out what members of different ethnicities living in Turkey as Turkish citizens think about how the Turkish education system addresses cultural differences in schools. This qualitative study utilized a descriptive analysis method to collect data through five focus groups based ethnic diversity: Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Balkan refugees and Caucasian refugees. Each focus group consisted of four participants and interviews were tape-recorded and then analyzed by using the qualitative research analysis program, NVivo 10. The results show that most of the participants think that the current education system in Turkey does not represent the ethnic and cultural differences in Turkey since it is developed based on a certain ideology. Another finding of the study is that teachers are not aware of the cultural differences in their classrooms and they do not have adequate training to meet the expectations of students from those cultures. The participants have stated that in order to get the values and beliefs of different cultures living in Turkey represented in educational institutions, certain reforms should be implemented effectively, including teacher training programs.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Differences in Education, Citizenship Education, Ethnic Minority, Cultural assimilation.

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Introduction

The necessity of living together, which is one of the requirements of globalization, brings important problems in itself unless proper policies are implemented. In order to have people of different beliefs and societies living together, it is important to develop a sense of awareness since cultural diversity has become an important part of human society in today's world (Bekemans, 2014), including educational institutions (Mishra, 2014).

Multiculturalism is seen as a remedy to the violence and contradictions resulting from ethnic differences (Clyne and Jupp, 2011). On the other hand, there are claims that multiculturalism results in separation of societies since it brings the differences rather than similarities to the forefront (Inglis, 1996; Davies, 2010).

A central factor to the unifying and divisive potentials of multiculturalism is immigration, especially in economically, politically and socially developed countries. Countries considered to be more liberal have offered refuge to different cultural and ethnic groups within their boundaries (Kivisko, 2004). As of the year 2006, 22% of the Australian population; as of 2001, 18.4% of the population in Canada; as of 2000, 12% of the population in the United States of America and 9.1% of the population of the United Kingdom were born in countries other than where they reside (Forest ve Dunn, 2010). Regardless of the increasing proportion of multiculturalism in those societies, there is a sense of hesitation towards addressing these differences in schools (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2009). In this regard, a study conducted in 2004 in Australia shows that 85% of the participants considered multiculturalism to be an important factor for the democratization of Australian society. The findings of the same study, however, also revealed that 45% of the participants expressed hesitation towards multiculturalism since the inclusion of many ethnicities might weaken the Australian society (Dunn, et. al, 2004).

According to an analysis of census records from the year 2000, 1.260.530 people living in Turkey were born in another country. The study also reports the number of foreign people living in Turkey by the year 2000 to be 267.441. (Yakar, 2013). An important finding of this study is that the immigration-from-Turkey process that started by 1950s started to change to immigration-to-Turkey for several reasons, including immigration policies enforced by European countries and the development of Turkey in social, political and economic areas. Since migration patterns to Turkey involve people from multiple ethnicities and nationalities, Turkey has become more diverse in the past decade.

Some believe that multiculturalism and the increase in the population of different ethnic groups will raise concerns in all social institutions, including

education. To address these concerns, we recommend Sapin's approach to multicultural education. The country is composed of different ethnic groups and administrations, and even though the central ministry of education has certain roles, the regional education authorities have voices on deciding the curriculum to be followed in schools (Hatt and Issa, 2008). In 2006 made, the education ministry established the course *Citizenship and Human Rights Education* a requirement for all schools in Spain. Although this was seen as a step forward regarding teaching tolerance, there are discussions about how the course will be taught in autonomous regions (Hatt and Issa, 2008; Tarman and Acun, 2010).

There are researchers claiming that the national education system in Turkey ignores the cultural differences in the society and the nationalistic education policies bring cultural clashes rather than social cohesion and solidarity (Çayır, 2010). In contrast, other researchers have stated that both teachers and students have some level of hesitation in talking about their own rights and realities and the reason of this hesitation is told to be the fear towards criticizing the state's official ideology (Firat, 2010). How we can work to reconcile these differences so as to create a welcoming classroom and educative environment is important to bring the different sides together. At the same time, teaching about different cultural values and beliefs in education in a multicultural society might prevent conflict for future generations. In this regard, even though the values to be taught in schools might vary, there are universal values that are accepted by majority throughout the world. These are categorized as: anti-racist values, multiculturalism values, values regarding awareness of social life, and valuing the individual (Blum, 1992).

Turkey's 1965 census was the last one to directly ask the people about their mother tongue and other languages they speak. The results of that census showed that about 12,7% of the population was Kurdish based on the participants' answers (van Bruinessen, 1996). Unfortunately, there is no updated data on the exact population of ethnic groups in Turkey since people are not asked about their ethnicities and languages in census anymore. However, we know that there are many different groups living in Turkey that makes the country multicultural. Those groups can be categorized as religious groups and ethnic groups since some are recognized as distinct categories due to their religion while others are categorized based on their ethnicity. Among the religious communities, the major categories are Alevis, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, and Assyrians (Karimova and Deverell, 2001).

Alevis are divided into two groups: the Arabic speaking community (Nusayri) and the Turkish and Kurdish speaking Alevis. Their ritual practices differ compared to the Sunni group that is the majority group in Turkey and there remains a dilemma since loyalty to ethnic (Kurdish vs Turkish) or

religious (Shia) community is still an issue for this group of people. Religion is another area of concern since the state does not recognize Alevis as being the members of a distinct religious community despite there being approximately 3 million people. There have been some initiatives over the last five years to recognize them at the policy level, but there is no evidence that the goals have been achieved.

Armenians are the second community in the country categorized as a distinct religious group. They are attached to Christian faith but the public in Turkey usually categorize them as a distinct religion and do not consider them to be Christians. The number of Armenians living in Turkey is believed to be 50,000-60,000 (Karimova and Deverell, 2001), however, it cannot be validated since there is no official way of measuring it.

The Jewish community is the third group of people categorized among the religious groups. The majority of Jewish are the ones whose ancestors were expelled from Spain in 1492 (Karimova and Deverell, 2001). The end of a single-party regime in Turkey in 1946 provided Jews with more freedom compared to the first 30 years of the republic, particularly around opportunities for private enterprise. Today's Jews living in Turkey try to assimilate by speaking Turkish and giving their children Turkish names (Neyzi, 2005).

There have been tensions between Greeks and Turks since the establishment of the republic. Most people who identify as Turkish do not have a positive perception of Greek people due to the political problems that continue to exist between the two nations. The Greek population in Turkey was reported to be around 48,000 in 1965, however the current population of Greek Christians is estimated to be around 3,000, with most living in Istanbul. From a class perspective, the Greek community is known to be the wealthiest minority group living in the country (Karimova and Deverell, 2001).

Assyrians are another community that is considered among the religious minorities in Turkey. They are Christians, however one can claim that they are much more ignored by the authorities compared to the other Christians living in the country. The population of Assyrians in Turkey today is estimated to be around 4,000 that is losing its viability rapidly as a result of emigration to European countries (Karimova and Deverell, 2001).

Several other ethnic communities exist in Turkey, with the largest being Kurds, Romas, Caucasians, Arabs and Balkan immigrants. Since the census does not ask for preferred language or ethnicity, we do not know the populations of those communities, however, Kurds, which constitute more than 20% of the whole population, are the second most dominant group in the country after Turks.

Kurdish people are mostly concentrated in the eastern and south-eastern part of Turkey. Since 1984, there have been great tensions in those regions, however, recent policies implemented by the government have decreased the tension by meeting the needs of the Kurdish population such as elective language education, Kurdish programs in higher education, and broadcasting and publishing in Kurdish language (Karimova and Deverell, 2001). Despite these initiatives, tensions between the first and second largest ethnic groups in the country remain.

Most recently, the flow of Syrian refugees into Turkey—reportedly totalling 2,5 million—has created another ethnic group since the majority of those refugees will not return to Syria. Relevant policies are required in order to tackle with potential problems of this refugee population.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, three different but complementary theories were adopted. The first one is cultural differences theory, which emerged as a response to the cultural deprivation theory, and defends the idea that students from dominant groups were academically more successful since ‘others’ experienced cultural deprivation. Cultural differences theory does not accept this assertion and claims that students from each ethnic and cultural group have their own values and since they do not find those values represented in schools, they fail academically (Baratz and Baratz, 1970; Shade, 1982).

The cultural differences theory claims that ignoring the values and beliefs of minorities in school settings results in the academic failure (Yigit & Tarman, 2013). It is claimed that the dominant groups do not take the values and differences of other cultural and ethnic groups into consideration while establishing the school culture that results in minorities to feel themselves excluded from the society. There are researches conducted on the area of school culture and ethnic differences showing to what extent they are far from each other (Gay, 2000). In those schools, it is believed that the failure of students from minority groups are ignored, the students do not care about their failure since they experience integration problems in school due to cultural differences, and proper policies are not adopted in those schools to include the cultural differences (Banks, 2007).

The second theory adopted in this study is social constructivism. Social constructivism is supportive and complimentary of cultural differences theory because in both cases, each student is recognized as having their own worldview and in possession of family values that are carried to school. This suggests that students create their own worldviews based on the cultural

values they learn from their families and then create their own values (Bruning et. al, 1999; Eggen and Kauchak, 2004). Education systems are expected to not homogenize those values and differences but to integrate them into the school environment. In order to have a more effective and welcoming learning process for students, cultural differences should not be ignored (Wertsch, 1985).

Taking cultural differences into account means creating learning opportunities that are relevant to students' backgrounds. In this sense, social constructivism theory claims that students should take an active role in the learning process (Glaserfeld, 1989). Contrary to the old methods where students were passive and teachers were active, students are more engaged and information is exchanged between students and teachers. In other words, there is an active learning process in this method. If this method is implemented effectively with the help of the democratic attitudes exhibited by teachers, students will have the opportunity to share their own values and beliefs with their peers that will create a positive atmosphere in the classroom. This will in turn help student from different backgrounds to know each other better and create common truths. The role of teachers here is very important that they should not be in the position of directing beliefs but discussions.

Another important aspect of social constructivism theory is that knowledge should be handled as a whole (Farman, 2016). In this sense, the information gained in schools and societies should not be separated and should be regarded as complimentary. This way the family life and school life of students will not contradict and those two institutions will not falsify each other (McMahon, 1997).

The third theoretical approach is the assimilation theory that presumes a group's language or culture will be similar to the dominant group in the area. In this sense, the classic assimilation model argues that immigrants and native-born people will converge so that they become more similar day by day by displaying common values, characteristics and norms. Another assumption of the theory is that the longer minorities stay with the dominant group, the more they accept the values of the majority group that help those minorities to assimilate (Brown & Bean, 2006). According to Gordon (1964), after the acquisition of language and culture, there are two more stages that minorities and immigrants follow to get assimilated. The first stage is called structural assimilation where the minorities build close relationships with the host societies and then comes the second stage, understood as large-scale intermarriages. After cultural acquisition, structural assimilation and intermarriages, minority groups start to identify themselves with the host society.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to find out how different ethnicities living in Turkey as Turkish citizens evaluate the way education system in Turkey approach cultural differences. The study was structured to answer the following questions.

- 1- Are the values and cultural differences of minorities ignored in schools and if so, do they have any influence on the academic success of the students from the participants' point of view?
- 2- Does the education system encourage students to bring their differences and integrate them to the school environment from the participants' point of view?
- 3- Do educational institutions assimilate minorities from the participants' point of view?

Method

This qualitative study adopted a descriptive analysis method in order to define and analyze cultural elements such as individual and social behavior, structure, process, values and norms (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008). In order to conduct cultural analysis, one should have adequate knowledge about the cultures to be studied and spend enough time to have deeper information about them. In this sense, extensive research about the ethnic groups studied in this paper was performed by the researchers. The participants were informed before the beginning of the study about the aim of the study.

The maximum variation sampling method was adopted in order to access the participants. The aim here was to get people who would be interested in the topic of the research as well as from different social status, occupations, and age groups. The participants were chosen with the help of cultural associations of the related ethnic groups.

The Balkan Refugees focus group consisted of two people from Bulgaria, one from Albania, and one from Macedonia. Among the participants were two first-generation immigrants and two second-generation immigrants. The Caucasian Refugees focus group included two participants from Abkhazia, one from Karachay–Cherkess region, and one from Batumi. This group also had two first-generation and two second-generation immigrants. The Kurdish group consisted of one participant from Şanlıurfa, one from Elazığ, one from Malatya and one from Van. Turkish group was consisted of one participant from Isparta, one from Kocaeli, one from Gümüşhane and one from Van. The Arab group was consisted of two participants from Batman and two from Mardin. In qualitative research, the involvement of researcher is an important

part of the study. However, in this study, the necessity to maintain the autonomy was the reason to not to mention the involvement of the researchers in relation to their ethnicities.

The education level of the participants was also taken account while doing the analysis. In this sense, two of the participants had 5-years of basic education level, one had 8-year of elementary school level of education, six had high school level of education and eleven had university or higher level of education.

The data for this study was collected through focus group studies. Each group consisted of four participants that made twenty participants in total and each focus group consisted of a single ethnic group. A focus group study was organized because groups of different cultural backgrounds create their own normative patterns, they also represent their own cultural values within the created groups (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2008). It was important for the researcher to get sincere responses from the participants and to do so, instead of asking close-ended survey questions, the researcher asked open-ended questions to the participants that helped to establish a conversation between the researcher and the participants.

The data collected through focus group studies was analyzed using a descriptive analysis method. The descriptive analysis method allows researchers to organize data based on the themes determined by the researchers and the questions to be asked by taking those themes into consideration (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). The first step was to create a framework using the themes derived from the interviews and then to organize the data under the appropriate themes. The second stage was to read the data and combine it in a meaningful and logical way. The last step was to define the data and transfer it to the readers. Besides giving direct quotations from the participants' sentences, the researcher transferred his own remarks to the reader in the conclusion section. The analysis of the data was conducted using the software NVivo 10. The researcher did not mention the real names of the participants while referring their ideas. Each participant in each ethnic group was given a unique number and mentioned accordingly.

NVivo analysis showed that 44 different themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews. Some of those themes are group superiority, state control of education, not inclusive curriculum, necessity of differences to be represented in educational institutions, superiority of the country instead of individual groups, importance of commonalities to be represented, opportunity given to all groups to be represented, importance of teacher education in gaining a multicultural perspective, prejudice, families need to get educated for tolerance.

Results

A majority of respondents reported that cultural differences should be included in the education system. In addition to the participants who reported that differences might be used to find the shared values, some participants told that excluding differences might result in people to despise each other. Among the Caucasian refugees, the participant number 1 stated that differences should be represented in education however there might be some obstacles.

Now, even though I am an educator, I do not know how to do it. I mean it is very difficult. Because those cultural entities, I mean Adighes, Abazins... It becomes easier if they live together. But for example we are not like that. How many Abazins students will you find, let's say, in Adapazari Mustafakemalpaşa and then teach them their native language? The state has some difficulties to overcome. However, it should be done. I believe in that. I believe in the necessity that the mother language should be taught as the second language in schools' (Caucasian Refugee-1)

A similar result was found in the interviews with the Turks. In this sense, the Turkish participants stated that differences should be represented in the education system, but must include all ethnic groups to address the complexity of diversity. Turkish participants specifically talked about the Kurdish ethnicity and said that Kurdish people should have the right to get education in their own language.

Turk 2: Definitely it should be done.

Turk 3: This is a very sensitive subject. If you take this side into account in Turkey, then you need take all ethnic groups into account.

Turk 2: Ok, they should get it, too.

Turk 3: But how many ethnic groups are there in Turkey?

Turk 2: No. The thing we should include in our education system is the idea to live together with other ethnicities.

Turk 4: For example, you can have other religions taught in schools.

Turk 3: Yes, it can be!

Turk 1: For example, folklore. When you teach folklore dance in elementary schools, you can include teachings of different cultural groups.

Turk 2: I think it is doable. Now, you teach someone Turkish language. Turkish language should be taught but just imagine that a person understands classes better if given in Kurdish language.

Turk 1: He will learn better.

Turk 2: I learn that course in Turkish but another one experience problems there.

Some participants stated that domination of a certain group in the education system results in ignoring social differences and it is planned to have graduates sharing similar thoughts regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Among the participants, Kurd 4 stated that the current education system is much more democratic but still have some deficiencies. He said that especially in primary schools, students are directed to accept certain issues without questioning them while cultural and ethnic differences should not be ignored for those students. Turk 4 claimed that it becomes much more difficult to provide democratic education for a state that has a certain ideology. Arab 4 stated that people are usually the enemies of what they do not know and different cultures' knowing each other is an important step for social peace.

Balkan Refugee 1 stated that cultural differences and the specific values resulting from those differences should be represented in education institutions but the implementation process could not lead to a chaotic situation in the country. He stated that the common values of the state should be preserved and those are language, flag and patriotism.

The participant Caucasian Refugee 2 stated that cultural differences should be represented in education system however the current education system is not ready to do that. He stated that Turkey would be a leading country in the world if all ethnic and cultural differences can be represented in all institutions in a democratic way.

I do not believe that those cultures can be saved just by having a little of them in education system. The structure is not appropriate to do that. I mean cultural erosion has come to such a position that having only elective courses in some levels will not be able to stop it. First you need to open institutes. Regional academies should be opened in different regions of the country. Research centers on Abkhazian language and culture should be opened. Who will teach those courses if you do not have those institutions? They opened the department of Circassia language and education here. Three teachers came from Caucasia but they do not know Turkish language. None of our students know Circassia. You have opened Circassia language and literature department but the students

and instructors cannot communicate. This is important and the planning process is not something that will work in a short time. (Caucasian Refugee 2)

The majority of the participants stated that the current education system is not comprehensive and leaves cultural differences behind. The participant Kurd 1 said that people living in this country having different cultural backgrounds are thought to be the member of a unique culture and ignored by the dominant groups. Balkan Refugee 2 was complaining about the History books and stated that those books do not write the real history of cultural and ethnic identities. The participant Turk 3 stated that the current education system just cares about today but it should also think about future incidents.

It cannot be done this way, like keeping the wolf from the door. A more comprehensive reform should be conducted in order to cover all people living in Turkey and unfortunately it is a dream right now' (Turk 3)

Arab 1 stated that he is not aware of his own ethnic identity and cultural values due to the education he received in state schools. He stated that none of his teachers informed him about his ethnic background and cultural values.

I have not received education regarding Arab ethnicity. This is my background. I was very unconscious in this matter up to now. The books we were reading in schools were almost claiming that we were coming from Hun Turks. It is a kind of assimilation' (Arab 1)

The participants Balkan Refugee 3, Kurd 2 and Arab 1 stated similar opinions and said that education system ignores different worldviews and ideas that does not overlap with the realities of the country.

Among the questions asked to the participants was about including differences in education system and whether it could lead to separations in society. Majority of the participants stated that including differences in education could lead mutual recognition and respect in society instead of separations.

I think all people should express their opinions. I mean we should not insist on the notion that our system is the best. People should make a choice based on the emerging ideas. For example, Kurds might have better solutions to the problems and we should not hesitate to use what is right.' (Turk 3)

Kurd 2 stated that the education system should be free from political arguments. He claimed that having cultural differences in education system would result in a more peaceful society. Caucasian Refugee 1 also stated that cultural differences that are represented in education institutions will be a source of happiness for the society. Arab 2 claimed that living together would

be more peaceful in an environment where a group does not seek to establish superiority over another group.

Another question asked to the participants was whether it was an advantage for students of different ethnic backgrounds to get into the same classroom together. A great majority of the participants stated that this would be an advantage since students of different cultures would get the opportunity to get to know each other. Balkan Refugee 4 stated that different cultures' being together will help students to gain new perspectives in their daily life.

Some participants talked about the importance of including differences in education in the global world and said that it would turn Turkey into a leading country in the world since it would improve the implementation of democracy in the country. Turk 4 said that having those cultural differences would result in gaining the awareness about the importance of multiculturalism that would result in abandoning prejudices.

The last question asked to the participants was whether the teachers were aware of the cultural differences in classrooms or not. Majority of the participants stated that teachers are not aware of the cultural differences and they pay no attention to the needs of those students.

'The teacher did not receive that form of education. He is a teacher but he did not get education in that area. I think majority are not aware of the differences and unfortunately they are not aware of what they do not know. He just continues doing what his predecessors did.' (Turk 2)

Kurd 1 stated that teachers lack the training regarding cultural differences but the new ones are more conscious compared to the old teachers. Especially the Caucasian Refugee participants attached importance to the teachers' being unaware of cultural differences in their classrooms.

Conclusion

The first question of the study was to find out whether the values and cultural differences of minorities were ignored in schools and if so, do they have any influences on the academic success of the students from the participants' point of view? The analysis of the interviews show that educational institutions continue to ignore the cultural differences of the minority groups participating living in Turkey. Based on the responses from the participants, the children whose cultural and ethnic differences are not represented in the classroom are disadvantaged compared to the ones whose values are represented. This finding tells us that the assumptions of cultural differences theory are valid in the context of this study.

The second question that the researchers tried to answer was to find out whether the education system encourages students to bring their differences and integrate them to the school environment from the participants' point of view. The results do not show that participants believed that schools encourage differences. On the contrary, participants claim that schools are trying to eliminate the differences and ask the students accept the official ideology that might show differences from culture to culture. The social constructivism theory argues that academic success depends on representation and participation of cultural differences in school environment. The researchers were not able to evaluate this theory since the participants did not mention if education system encourages differences to be integrated in school curriculum. A further quantitative study might be conducted to evaluate the theory in this sense.

The third question was to find out whether educational institutions assimilate minorities from the participants' point of view. The majority of respondents claimed that educational institutions assimilate minorities by not taking their cultural and ethnic differences into account. They also talked about intermarriages and stated that they have relatives from other ethnic groups living in Turkey. In this sense, the assumptions of the assimilation theory are validated with this study.

The study finds that participants of different ethnic groups reached a consensus on the reality that the current education system is formed in the framework of a certain ideology which is defined as the 'state ideology' and does not reflect cultural differences that reflect the reality of Turkey. They think that teachers do not have adequate training to meet the needs of students from different cultures. Appropriate reforms should be implemented including teacher training programs.

The participants have stated different views regarding how differences should be represented in education system. Most of the participants prioritized mother tongue while talking about cultural and ethnic differences. However, instead of providing educational services solely using the mother tongue of each ethnic group, the participants talked about the possibility of teaching those languages in separate classes. Teaching language is what the participants have prioritized in this sense. This finding of the study might direct the *education in mother tongue* discussion to a different direction. Participants talked about language education as the most important cultural difference and that the cultural values, beliefs, and traditions are less important. The participants do not education being based in the Turkish language as these skills provide a common value among the members of different ethnic and cultural groups in Turkey. A second claim relates to the success of assimilatory politics on the perceptions of the public which might

be the subject of further studies. Another important aspect of the findings of this study is that teachers are not considered competent enough in teaching in a multicultural society. This finding tells us that the education departments in universities should be reformed accordingly in order to reflect the realities of the society.

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