

Qualitative Obstacles in Turkish Education System and Suggestions¹

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ABSTRACT In the present study, which aims to detect the qualitative obstacle in front of Turkish Education System and related suggestions based on administrators and teachers' opinions, qualitative research methods were used. The results of the study suggested that such reasons as constant and unplanned changes in education system, especially that of selection and placement of administration and teachers, and failure to implement a sound educational policy, are responsible for hampering the qualitative improvement. It is apparent that a viable educational policy and planning on the basis of a social agreement is needed together with a philosophical and intellectual transformation in education.

INTRODUCTION

The recent technological, economic, social and political developments have caused significant changes and developments in education as well as many other fields. These changes and developments do not make it essential to memorize the information as its own anymore, but to have access to the knowledge easily, fast and in a productive way, to use it in real life, and be able to compete in every field. To enjoy all these capabilities is only possible with lifelong education.

Recently there has been an increase in the number of people in Turkey who demand education in parallel to the increase in knowledge and human population. It is observed that adequate level of qualitative developments cannot be achieved as much as the quantitative developments at every stage of education.

Quality is defined as the situation that constitutes the distinction between entities in some or other aspects other than the quantitative ones (Dogan 2002: 15-16). According to Murgatroyd and Morgan (1992, as cited in Dailler 2002: 2), quality means achieving the standards. It refers

to the maintenance and management of the procedures defined by the experts.

To Nightingale and O'Neil (1994, as cited in SPU 1997: 2), quality in education means the effectiveness of an institution to achieve its goals; it is the announcement of the goals and mission of a university; it is the display of its effect and effectiveness against a certain situation it faces.

The problems regarding the quality of education in Turkey like around the world have always been in the agenda and discussed, but there have been inadequate attempts towards qualitative improvements in education. This situation justifiably has been accompanied by attempts towards constant criticism and change of education system and practices. Turkish Language Institution (TLI 2014) dictionary defines the term quality as synonym with property referring to features, attributes or traits characterising the nature of something and distinguishing it from other things, the state of goodness or badness of something. The terms quality in education can be used to refer to the betterness of the education service.

Quality in education is a contemporary administration idea, philosophy and life style aiming at a learner-centered understanding of education, requiring the participation of all stakeholders, anticipating the ongoing development and improvement of education process under the leadership and responsibility of senior administrative parties (Keskin and Keskin 2005: 32).

Although there are no all-agreed basic concepts used as quality standards at schools, some

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general quality indicators can be said to include student achievement, teacher quality, teacher-practices/classroom organization and the quality of school administration.

According to the OECD data (2012: 5-170), schools and students with disadvantages need qualified education and that economical, social and political reasons hinder the improvement of qualified education. It is emphasized that schools, teachers and students in disadvantaged regions should be supported economically, socially, pedagogically, culturally and politically. Equality in quality should be major concern for everyone to get an equal chance of qualified education in order to obtain high performance in education. Policies promoting equality and quality both in the context of system and schools should be followed in order to help everyone succeed in education. Quality concerns regarding education have been costing a fortune. Quality problems regarding education have been causing students failing at school and leading to dropouts, social maladjustment, decrease in job opportunities and regression of social wellness.

To Gunay (2012), Turkey has experienced qualitative improvement in education, but it still suffers qualitative problems.

Several researches (Sunbul 1996; Yilmaz 2000; Bakiođlu and Can 2010; Aksoy et al. 2011; ERE 2011; Can 2014d: 67-68) have emphasized the problem of quality in Turkish education system and defined the components impairing the quality of education, offering some suggestions for improvement.

According to the Education Monitoring Report published by the Education Reform Entrepreneurship (ERE) (2013: 15) there is a need to create a platform on which educators, researchers, policy makers, representatives of public/private institutions and NGOs, academicians can work altogether to improve the quality of education, and in this respect Ministry of National Education [MoNE] has significant responsibilities. Moreover, as a complementary attempt to increase accessibility in education, attempts aiming at improving the quality in education at national level should be prioritized considering the regional differences.

According to Can's study results (2014d: 67-68) the following current problems have been waiting to be solved in Turkish Education System: frequent and unmethodical changes of the education system, lack of quality in education, national exams, selection, raising and emplace-

ment of managers and teachers, rotation of managers and teachers, insufficiency of professional and technical education and lack of career planings for managers and teachers.

In Turkey, different indicators are used to show the qualitative improvement in education. However, among them, the results of international exams indicate the quality of education clearly. For example according to PISA-2012 reports (MoNE 2013: 7-12), Turkey ranked under the OECD average scores in the fields of math, science and reading. According to PISA-2012 scores, Turkey ranked 44th in Mathematics, 42nd in reading and 43rd in science among 65 countries. Moreover, Turkey is under OECD average in terms of the rate of highly performing students. These scores also indicate that Turkish education system is at a level which needs to be improved. Furthermore, one of the remarkable data of 2011 statistics of Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) is that about one-fourth of 4th and 8th grade students in Turkey did not even achieve the basic level of competencies. This situation is another indicator of a problem in the quality of education. The fact that some comprehensive practices taking place in different fields of education in Turkey have been recently criticized and kept on the agenda by different segments of society and teacher unions, media, administrators and teachers put forth the reality and significance prioritizing the qualitative improvements in parallel with the quantitative improvements in Turkish education system. In this respect, based on these quantitative developments and current problems in Turkish education system, it is of great importance to determine the obstacles hindering the quality of education and to develop some recommendations based on the views of teachers and administrators.

Objective

The purpose of the study is to determine the obstacles hindering the qualitative improvements in education and develop feasible recommendations based on administrators' and teachers' views.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative research method in order to determine the views of administrators and teachers about the obstacles in front of the qualitative improvement in educa-

tion. The data for the study was obtained from 10 administrators (6 principals and 4 vice principals) and 10 teachers who attend a graduate program at a foundation university in Istanbul (20 participants in total) in the written form using a questionnaire from including 2 open-ended question in 2013-2014 academic year. The obtained data were evaluated by distinguishing them in subcategories via content analysis.

According to Yildirim and Simsek (2006: 64), qualitative research adopts the principle of presenting the descriptive data, which has been collected via multiple ways in many cases about the problem studies, with its full richness and depth.

Making use of results of qualitative research in practice happen in different ways (Altunisik et al. 2002: 225): These include the formation of a platform for practitioners to conduct advanced researches; contribution to institutional and organisational development; helping the practitioners to comprehend their work better; and most importantly it allows the confirmation or disconfirmation of some 'mechanical' relationships established via quantitative data collection and analysis methods, by testing in depth through qualitative methods.

Miles and Huberman (1994, as cited in Yildirim and Simsek 2006: 223) follow a three-step data analysis procedure: "data reduction", "data display", and "drawing conclusion and verification".

The literature review (Strauss and Corbin 1990; Dey 1993; Miles and Huberman 1994; Wolcott 1994, as cited in Yildirim and Simsek 2006: 221-236) suggest that the data analysis process in qualitative studies is mainly based on descriptive and content analysis in general. These steps are defined as description, analysis, interpretation or description, classification and association.

There are six principal components in content analysis (Aziz 2008: 124): data collection, unification, sampling, limitation guidelines, analysis, inference, and reporting the study.

The main goal in content analysis is to reach concepts and associations which can explain the obtained data. The data summarized and interpreted during descriptive analysis are exposed to a finer process during the content analysis and those concepts and themes not noticed with a descriptive approach can be discovered thanks to this kind of analysis (Yildirim and Simsek 2006: 227).

The participants were asked the following questions:

- 1) What are the obstacles in front of the qualitative improvement in Turkish Education System?
- 2) What are your recommendations to ensure qualitative improvement in Turkish Education System?

FINDINGS

The participating administrators and teachers listed the obstacles hindering the qualitative improvements in education as follows: Physical inadequacies, large classes –inadequacy of classrooms, inadequacy of teachers' economical and personal rights, disgracing teachers and administrators, inadequacy and frequent change of curricula. Failure to train teachers in their fields at a competent level, constant and unplanned change of education system, conducting the educational policies as a part of government policy rather than a state policy and based on ideological basis hinder the qualitative improvement in education.

According to all of the participants (n=20), the inadequacy of selecting, training and employing administrators and teachers, and lack of a career planning for administrators and teachers, central exams based on multiple-choice tests, and prevalence of private courses and private lessons, and inadequacy of teacher training higher education programs hinder qualitative improvement in education.

Other obstacles of qualitative improvement as defined by all of the participating administrators and teacher altogether (n=20) included the failure to consider the opinions of administrators, teachers, parents, students and non-governmental organizations when changing educational policies; nepotism, favouring advocators of a certain ideology when appointing to certain positions, political pressures at every stage of education; teachers' and administrators resistance to change, and regional discrimination.

Moreover, inadequacy and over-politicization of teacher unions, inadequacy of supervision system, disregarding quality as quantitative developments are prioritized, educational policies unable to meet the social demands and expectations, unreliable and unstable transitions between educational stages, employment problems of the graduates, and inadequacy of vocational and

technical education were listed as the obstacles hindering the qualitative improvement in education.

The findings of the research reveal that constant changes in the education system adversely affect the quality of the education. Moreover, all of the participating administrators (n=10) mentioned, as distinct from the teachers, that uncertainty, instability and inapplicability of administrator selection and assignment system is a main obstacle.

The participating administrators and teachers mainly made the following suggestions to improve the quality of education: improvement of schools' physical infrastructure, development of education policies as state policies, and implementation of the policies detached from political influences. Administrators' and teachers' economical and personal rights should be enhanced; policies regarding the selection, training and employment of administrators and teachers should be revised; a career planning should be adopted which supports administrators' and teachers' professional development. According to the findings of the study, education should be supported in terms of financial and human resources at every stage, equality of opportunities should be ensured, technological investments should be made equally to every region. An autonomous monitoring system based on guidance in education should be formed; education planning and policy approaches should be implemented with a pluralistic manner, teacher training higher education institutions and programs should be rearranged; moreover participation of all education stakeholders should be involved in the decision-making processes about education; and the findings of education sciences should be employed. The transitions between school stages should no more be based on exams, but instead of an exam-centred approach, the philosophy of accessing the knowledge and using it in the real life should be based on. And finally the philosophy and possibilities of lifelong learning should be popularized in the society.

DISCUSSION

The overcrowded classrooms were found to be a qualitative obstacle in the study. According to the findings in Bakioglu (1994: 18, 1999: 23-38) crowded classrooms are one of the most important factors adversely affecting the education-

quality. It is stated that effective school means the schools where instruction and student learnings have the highest quality.

According to TEA (2009) report, overcrowded classes which hinder effective education and instruction, are still a problem for teachers and their students. These findings support the findings of the present study and put forward again that crowded classrooms adversely affect the quality of education.

According to the findings of various research (Tufan 1997; Kuzey 2002; Pervez and Hanif 2003; Guler 2006; Akpinar 2008; Dogan 2008; Rençber 2008) which support the findings of the present research, especially the overcrowded classrooms, inadequate space for game activities, inadequate number of instructional equipment, neglected and unclean classroom are regarded as the main factors causing problems for the teachers. Moreover, overcrowded classrooms cause the teachers struggle excessively, which causes them to suffer tension.

In another study which support the present findings, Gunduz and Can (2011: 756-757) reported that teachers perceive problems regarding the physical conditions at a high level among the other problem areas, and instruction at crowded classrooms one of the important problems.

According to the findings of the present research, inadequacy of teachers' economical and personal rights, disgracing teachers and administrators, inadequacy of curricula are the obstacles hindering the qualitative improvements. According to the findings by Gunduz and Can (2011: 755-757) teachers perceive the problems regarding education administration, curricula, and personal rights at a high level. According to the findings of the same study, teachers perceived the decrease of the prestige of the teaching profession in the society, and inadequacy of wages to meet the daily needs as very important problems.

One of the most remarkable findings of the research was negative effects of national exams based on multiple-questions and prevalence of private course centres and private lessons on qualitative improvements in education. According to the findings by Can (2010: 28), Turkish Education System cannot be isolated from central exams. Exams have become the main objectives at all school stages. This situation has caused the instructional institutions not to perform their main function and incline more to the

practices based on national exams. Students, teachers, administrators and parents have (been made to) attach more importance to multiple-choice exams and exam preparation, rather than educational practices at schools. The national exams have created its private sector paving the way for private course centres, private lessons, etude-education centres and private publications. Financially growing up day by day, this exam sector has become an important pressure group affecting the education policies. This result confirms and supports the finding of the present study.

According to the study findings, the obstacles hindering the qualitative improvements in education included constantly changing the education system as a whole, especially the system regarding the selection, training and employment of administrators and teachers and education.

The new education system (4+4+4) which began to be implemented as of 2012-2013 school year in Turkey has caused serious criticisms by different segments of the society, particularly the teacherunions. This situation also confirms the findings of the present study.

It is also observed that the system regarding the assignment and selection of administrators constantly change in Turkey. For example, according to the regulation published in Official Gazette numbered 29026 (2014) the duties of the administrators who has worked for four years or more as of 14 March 2014 were terminated on 13 June 2014, which is the end of the 2013-2014 school year, without any need for any other transaction. The criticisms regarding the subjectivity and constantly changing nature of conditions demanded from the candidate administrators also confirm the findings of the present study.

As per the law no 5204 issued in 2004 in Turkey, teaching profession was divided into three career steps after candidacy period: teacher, expert teacher and chief teacher, and those completing the candidacy would be appointed as teachers. In 2005 graduate teachers and in 2006 undergraduate teachers were administered the Career Promotion Exam and 92,382 teachers were qualified as expert teacher, while 338 teachers were qualified as chief teacher. However, with its resolution in 2008 Constitutional Court annulled some of the important items of the law no 5204, thus making it impossible to implement the system regarding the teaching career. The lack of a

feasible career system for the administrators and teachers support the research findings.

According to research findings by Can (2014a: 53), the reasons hindering the teachers' professional development include the inadequacy of teacher organization and polarization among teachers, constant and unplanned changes in education system, lack of a career planning and failure to ensure career development, unsound teacher training and employment policies, and excluding teachers from decision making procedures. These findings are in conformity and support with the findings of the present study.

Certain issues like the title-status ambiguity of the teaching profession; dilemmas regarding the authority and responsibility; lack of an autonomous, scientific and professional accreditation institution keeps up-to-date the criticisms about the need for taking actions to professionalize teaching in Turkey still a part of the agenda (Eristi 2008: 9).

According to research findings in Can (2013: 307) inadequacy of current education policy and current education planning approaches together with the bureaucratically obstacles adversely affect teachers' professional development. This result is regarded at the same time as the obstacles of qualitative improvement in education.

According to Safran (2014: 2-3), the main problems of Turkish education system include such issues as the training and selection of the teacher candidates, pre-service education and training, teacher employment and working conditions, assignment, displacement and appointment, career development and rewarding, and the status of teacher professions. Today there are 734,000 student registered to all teacher training institutions, of whom a total of 500,000 students are enrolled in 97 education faculties and 184 science and letters faculties. It is stated that the number of candidate teachers awaiting for assignment are 300,000, while this will increase up to 1 million in 4 years, while the number of teachers actually needed by MoNE is only 129,000. This once again emphasize that what matters is not employment but one of quality.

According to research findings in Can (2014b: 338; 2014c: 83), it was highlighted that in Turkey, there is not any urgent need for teachers, but there are teacher candidates waiting to be assigned, the right for pedagogical formation education has been provided to graduates or students of 360 different university student face-

to-face and with distant education methods, qualitative problems in teaching profession will continue to exist, and teacher training policies in Turkey teacher are mainly based on quantity rather than quality, the current quality in the fields of teacher training and educational sciences should be enhanced to improve teaching profession, and common standards must be decided. These findings support the findings of the present study.

According to the Education Monitoring Report (2013) published by Education Reform Entrepreneurship (ERG) solutions should be developed in order to analyse and understand the reasons for quality problems in education, correct goals should be support with integrated and effective policies and adequate resources, teaches and teacher policies should be the first priority of the education reform, a shift of “paradigm” should be executed rather than a “signboard shift” in secondary education.

According to Berberoglu (2010), basic factors which can be a solution to quality crises in education are “...correct curricula, correct instructional methods, qualified teachers and principals, well-prepared course books and materials, formation of positive classroom and school environments where students’ individual differences ad needs are taken into consideration.”

Students are required to be supported by parents and provided with healthy, protective, secure environments with necessary resources for a qualified education. In addition, qualified education requires a programme and sufficient material supply. In political, cultural and economical contexts, efforts are needed to provide qualified education (UNICEF 2000: 4-44).

According to the findings of the research, there are many obstacles hindering the qualitative improvement in Turkish Education System. There seems to be a need for significant efforts, educational planning and policy approaches in order to remove these obstacles.

CONCLUSION

Recently there have been important developments and changes in Turkish education system. Besides these quantitative improvements, there is also a need for quantitative improvements in education. There are apparent attempts, expectations, and demands from different segments of the society for the improvement of the quality of education. The quantitative developments in

education may cause the quality to be disregarded. It is also observed that in response to the overall change of education system, teachers and administrators working at different stages of education, including the teacher unions, have expectations and demands for removing the obstacles faced in order to ensure the qualitative improvement in education. According to the results, there are many obstacles in the Turkish education system regarding the management, supervision, programmes and politics. This situation decelerates the qualitative improvement of the education system. Particularly, insufficiency regarding the selection and emplacement of managers and teachers affect the quality of the education system negatively. In addition, frequent and irregular changes of the education system and not taking opinions of managers, teachers, parents, students and non-governmental organizations are major concerns. The insufficiency of the transition between teaching stages and the lack of emplacement of secondary education and higher education graduates among themselves reduce the effectiveness of the education system. National exams with multiple choice questions applied to students during the secondary and higher education admissions reduce the efficiency of schools and affect the quality of the education negatively. The lack of career planning for managers and teachers, insufficiency and overpolitization of organization among the education, autonomy with regard to education management, lack of being scientific and professional affect the qualitative improvement of the education system negatively.

According to the research findings while economic problems, problems regarding material resources, physical inadequacies are important obstacles of qualitative improvement, and they are not the only factors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The policies regarding the selection, education and emplacement of teachers and managers should be rearranged. Higher education institutions and programmes raising teachers should be rearranged. An applicable career planning system for managers and teachers should be formed and supported with necessary economic and social resources. The changes to be made regarding the education system should be based on scientific research results. In addition, man-

agers, teachers, students, parents and nongovernmental organisations should be consulted. The focus on national exams among the education system should be lifted.

The reasons for quality problems in education should be designated through scientific research findings and applicable reasonable should be developed. Policies regarding teacher selection, training and employment should be attached more importance.

Achieving qualified education requires a comprehensive social, cultural, philosophical, political and intellectual transformation.

In order to determine the qualitative obstacles among the education system, further research can be made in other regions of Turkey with bigger samples. The analysis of research could be run using both qualitative and quantitative methods. For a more comprehensive study, universities, nongovernmental organisations, National Education Ministry and parents' participation and support should be ensured.

LIMITATIONS

This research is limited with the managers and teachers having graduate education at the (Istanbul) foundation university at the west of Turkey and the analysis of their answers to 2 open ended questions. Content analysis was applied.

NOTE

- 1 This article was presented at the I. Eurasian Educational Research Congress. EJER- in Istanbul Üniversitesi, Istanbul-Turkey on April 24-25-26, 2014.

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