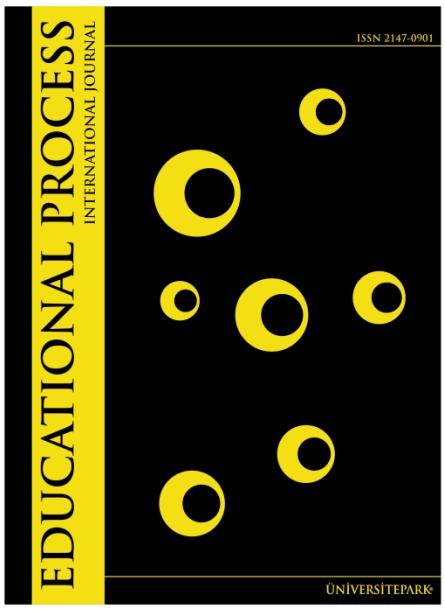


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Ability, Examination and Inclusive Education: Stretching the Hard Lines of the Educational System

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to delve into the debate about the epistemological nature of ability and examination, which we have been continuously exposed to, but rarely scrutinized. In the paper, I refer to Turkey as a case and argue that the dominance of ability-based paradigm and its associated assessment and placement systems have created a new educational order which categorizes schools and students based on how they perform at a single point in time. What is more, I critically evaluate the construction of "abilities" and "disabilities" through the means employed in the education system, followed by a discussion of the examination culture as a product of an ability-based system. Finally, I propose inclusive education as a powerful means of transforming the education system to an equitable and educationally effective one in which all students are welcomed and provided with education of good quality that both enriches childhood and maximizes chances of leading a fulfilled adult life.

Keywords: ability-based education, examination culture, inclusive education, equity.

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Introduction

We have entered an era in which we are consciously or unconsciously, and voluntarily or involuntarily in a state of competing to be selected, categorized and labeled as belonging to different educational routes, with each one mirroring the social system. The long-lasting impact of what is called "elitism" seems to have been coined by a new system based on "meritocracy" (Pedley, 1969). The former system, which favored a privileged class with the highest social order and economic status, pre-determined for a long time the executive class of the state system, including education. However, the latter system has made possible a slight transition between different routes of education on behalf of those who are not considered as elite, under the guise of ability, as the main measuring tool. Though it seems fairer, the ability-oriented system has now created its own school system with due exclusion of those who are less able, unable, or disabled.

Grouping students based on ability is one of the most encountered practices in the Turkish education system, as in many other countries (Slavin & Braddock, 1993). National examinations, which serve as a tool for categorization according to ability, start from early childhood and continue throughout the entire educational process. There are two streams of ideologies that conflict, but, paradoxically, sustain the existence of this system. The first is the overwhelming body of research which documents the ideological, theoretical, and practical flaws of ability grouping, as well as its harmful effect on students (Gamoran, 1992). The second is commonsense, which, on the one hand, objects to the harshness of classification, but on the other conforms (or has to conform) to standards in a system considered the best available among the worst options. This paper, therefore, aims to bring an objection to this "learned indifference" and explores alternatives to the categorization of individuals, schools, and therefore an emerging social order.

Ability-based educational order

Definitions of ability vary. Nicholls (1984) provides a comprehensive one. The concept can refer to an individual's current level of mastery in relation to their past performance or knowledge, where gains indicate competence. The mastery can also be assessed relative to the capacity of others, a context in which a gain in mastery alone does not indicate high ability. In this case, demonstrating high capacity depends on a higher achievement with equal effort. Being the most resorted to solution, ability grouping emerged as a response to two major systemic needs: (i) the need to select the best exam achievers in order to help raise academic standards nationally and, (ii) the need to help some schools to work out the difficulties experienced in relation to the behavior and attendance of some students (Ireson & Hallam, 1999). With ability being the most relied upon criterion in deciding who goes where, instead of establishing schools which provide equal life chances to all, the system is now in a vicious cycle where the already existing advantages and disadvantages are reproduced again and again. What is more, this cycle increasingly dominates more aspects of the education system than it has done in the past; becoming an inseparable part of an established competitive agenda.

The Turkish education system is made up of different routes which contain different education resources, provide different experiences to different groups of children and lead to different outcomes. This is associated with the emergence of different types of schools which cater for different student groups, selected based on assessment criteria primarily

measuring academic skills and intelligence. The first cluster of schools appears at the upper secondary level of education and contains only state schools. These are the 'General High School', 'Anatolian High School', 'Anatolian Teacher Training High School', 'Science High School', 'Social Sciences High School', 'Fine Arts and Sports High School 'Imam and Preacher High School', 'Anatolian Imam and Preacher High School', and the 'Vocational and Technical High School' (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2015). These schools, in spite of a first impression that they accommodate different student interests, actually select students mostly based on a single criterion which is ability testing, rather than voluntary application. The majority of the students attending these schools *have to* go to these schools, with no other option because of the test scores obtained. The second grouping, which is becoming even more complicated in the Turkish education system, is the one between state schools and private schools. As in many other countries, the difference between state schools and private schools in Turkey has caused ingrained inequality with regards to reaching resources and the quality of education, as measured by national examination scores. In addition, the gains reached by the provision of these school types have also affected entrance to universities, with a dominant majority having graduating from private schools, and a lucky minority entering the best universities. However, for a few years, wealth, which was the major criterion for selecting students to private schools, was accompanied by national examination scores which give the opportunity to the lucky few to be educated in private schools.

The debate on the distinction between state schools and private schools was inflamed after recent legislation (No: 6528, enacted on 1/3/2014) which obliged all private tutoring institutions (Turkish: Dershane) to either closer transform into private schools no later than the end of 2015.Expectedly, more than half of these institutions were transformed into private schools with questionable quality of the physical environments, human resources and educational content. The increasing supply of private education automatically decreased the wages while the government declared that they would contribute to the budget of low and middle class families to help them send their children to private schools (MoNE, 2014). As a result, this allowed a portion of children from middle class families to go to new private schools. Rather than investing in approaches to reform state schools where all students could freely join and benefit from quality and equitable education, the current picture shows that the recent emphasis of policy-makers to enhance the equity and quality in education seems to have been based on a process where education is increasingly privatized (commoditized) and the existing position of state schools is undermined (Kishan, 2008).

The third route is one that best reflects the categorization and segregation based on ability testing. It is the cluster which includes regular (or mainstream) schools and special schools. The movement in Turkey regarding the education of students considered as unable to conform to the existing structures, organization and expectations of regular schools has followed a similar path to the one observed internationally. An initial stage of isolating disabled individuals from almost all aspects of life was followed by their employment in tasks which required less intellectual but more labor force. Next, they were provided with education in segregated special schools (Armstrong, 2003; Ozgur, 2004; Shieh & Demirkol, 2014). However, the good intentions of special education schools to equip disabled individuals with basic coping skills were transformed into isolating systems and fell short of providing them with meaningful educational outcomes. For the past decade, however, there

has been a steady increase in the number of disabled students attending mainstream schools. However, this has created multiple systems of educating disabled students, and has made it difficult to re-organize and change the mainstream education system in order to accommodate an increasingly diverse society (Sakiz & Woods, 2015). In addition, in reality, special educational locations, assumptions, and paradigms perpetuated the mainstream educational institutions' reluctance to work with students with low ability levels as measured by intelligence and ability tests.

The three different routes described above have not only created a scattered school system, but also revealed the trade-off between standards and equity. The categorization of schools and placement of students based on the performance of these schools in national examinations firstly leads to inequitable outcomes; schools that select the best students based on ability tests are both equipped with more resources and provide richer educational experiences and outcomes for their graduates. Second, this path reduces the quality of education because competition between schools, narrowly conceived and planned teaching and learning practices, and highly centralized management and accountability regimes give little chance to schools to improve their systems and create new learning opportunities for *all* students, devise new teaching strategies and create a system based on collective responsibility and collaborative approaches (Dyson, Goldrick, Jones, & Kerr, 2010).

In addition to being a systemic challenge that weakens the potential of the education system to provide education for all, ability grouping also has negative effects on pupils' learning and developmental outcomes. Research on academic achievement and ability grouping raises serious questions about the effectiveness of classifying students by ability and placing them according to this classification. Among the studies conducted over the past century, there is no consistent evidence that grouping students by ability has a positive influence on learning for any group of students (Hallam & Toutounji, 1996; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Ozdemir & Yirci, 2015). On the other hand, this research shows that negative attitudes grow in schools toward educating students with low achievement levels and that grouping is ineffective, harmful to many, and undermines democratic values.

Constructing ability, inability and disability in the education system

The negative impact of labeling and its negative effects on individuals, school cultures and practices is nothing new. Categorization based on ability also has created those considered and labeled as "less able", "unable", and "disabled". This is much related to a medical model of understanding ability; the problems experienced by children stem from a deficiency in their ability and diagnosing this deficiency (often via testing and other psychometric, psycho-educational or medical tools) and locating the cause of the child's problems (often considered as impairment, learning difficulty or whatever) is necessary to determine an appropriate response, which often results in placement in an isolated setting, lowered expectations and associated attitudes. On the other hand, those identified as "able" or healthy out of measurement are given the freedom to choose an appropriate path for themselves. However, the above case shows that identification based on ability may create attitudinal bias and barriers in schools, enhancing the likelihood of exclusion from top-ranking and mainstream schools. Indeed, as said earlier, this approach to identification has not produced much evidence that interventions were differentially effective with different categories of learners (Keogh & MacMillan, 1996). Ainscow (1999) acknowledges that individual differences of children might influence their progress within the curriculum.

However, difficulties in learning may occur because of the decisions professionals make, the tasks they present, the resources they provide and the ways in which schools and classrooms are organized.

Proponents of ability grouping rarely consider Ainscow's (1999) aforementioned attention to the impact of environmental and organizational factors on ability, and often claim that ability is inborn and development ceases at a certain level (Bender & Wall, 1994). Ignoring the impact of the ecological systems and their elements, this ideology favors ability and intelligence tests as reliable and valid tools that can determine the exact level of ability and development of an individual at a certain point in time. However, over the past fifty years, several scholars demonstrated conclusively that this was not so (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Simon, 1955; Sternberg, 2008; Ogurlu, 2015). It is very difficult to separate the impact of heredity from that of the environment, and therefore, none of the tests can satisfactorily distinguish natural ability from what has been learned (Pedley, 1969). Nevertheless, contemporary education systems which still rely on the understanding of natural ability consciously or unconsciously, disregard the importance of an educational environment which can extend learning of students from all achievement levels, promote their development and, overall, facilitate their capabilities in any area of life in meaningful ways.

The organization of schools and classrooms in ways that they take care of the needs of a certain group of students often result in homogenizing skills through standardized planning and inflexible teaching. Hegarty (1991) considers this as a deficient model of education which is "organized on a crude categorical basis: children with certain characteristics, sometimes of a physical or medical nature, are grouped together for educational purposes and, by implication, treated as if their educational needs are similar" (p. 91). This implies a definite need to understand the diversity of individuals' learning processes and reflect this understanding on the provision of schools before categorizing them (Hegarty, 1991).

Turkey illustrates an exemplary case of the above processes where construction of the able and disabled is done through educational means. Official data indicate that 47.4% of the "disabled students did not have any kind of disability when starting the primary education/primary school" (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2010). This official statement entails careful consideration, and confirms that disability can be constructed within the educational system through various diagnostic and examination procedures.

The examination culture

Examination culture is a product of a competitive and ability-based education system which mostly relies on examinations to decide possible future paths for students. Despite its existence, it has not been possible yet to come across an official and academic paper which documents the impact of examination culture in Turkey. However, what is ironical, as Mee (1998) reports, is that the existence of the examination culture can be verified from an investigation of the daily Turkish newspapers and columns as well as other forms of media. Moreover, when asked about the dominance of examinations in our lives, anyone from Turkey can verify its existence in their own way of expression. This is primarily because of the tacit nature of the examination culture which can only be obtained by getting acquainted with that culture or belonging to it.

The current educational system in Turkey, which emphasizes "ableism" and educational credentials, has given rise to a national obsession with getting higher examination scores.

The main criterion to promote to the top streams and gain access to top schools in the country is the examination results, and therefore, students, families and educational staff fall into a competitive run in order to satisfy this criterion. The involvement of families and their feeling as being in competition, according to Kwan-Terry (1991), results from the concern they feel for their children's future as well as their own satisfaction with their children's achievement. As a result, children, their families and teachers all feel the pressure to prepare the students for examinations (Hehir, 2005). This creates a heavy reliance of students upon their teachers' notes and model answers, which they often memorize. Teachers, on the other hand, assume a "technicist" role in which technical knowledge is seen as the primary benefactor to the education system as a whole (Dyson et al., 2010).

In Turkey, the examination-based and competitive educational system focuses predominantly on academic achievement, and therefore, makes it difficult for all students to participate actively in school activities and experience quality education (Diker & Turkun, 2013). Right after primary school, at the lower secondary level, children have to take an examination called Transition System from Basic Education to Upper Secondary Education (Turkish: Temel Egitimden Ortaogretime Gecis Sistemi [TEOG]) in order to qualify for entrance to a high school. At the upper secondary level, they take two further exams called Examination for Transition to Higher Education (Turkish: Yuksekogretime Gecis Sinavi [YGS]) and License Placement Examination (Turkish: Lisans Yerlestirme Sinavi [LYS]).

Selection based on these examinations inevitably affects the design and implementation of the curriculum which targets a single aim: to excel in examinations. As a result, the current picture shows that reliance on these premises has created "winners" and "losers" as outputs of the education system (Sakiz, 2015). However, an equitable education system necessitates that a reformed understanding of student achievement and failure should focus on the development of child-centered structures that educate all children. This requires new understandings of curricular design, new ways of organizing schools, cooperation and participation of all children, and changes in the nature of teaching and learning that promote mutual support and achievement for all (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & McGue, 1995; Erkilic & Durak, 2013).

Recently, there has been a series of research studies scrutinizing the meaningfulness of educational outcomes in the Turkish education system (e.g., Education Reform Initiative, 2011; Sucuoglu & Kargin, 2006; Ozbulut & Sayar, 2009). The basic and most valuable outcome of the system is mostly considered as readiness for high school, university entrance examinations and achievement in these. However, the kind of research that investigates what kind of educational outcomes graduates from Turkish schools gain is not sufficient. In line with the academic content of these examinations, the content of the educational program both in primary and secondary phases is filled with highly academic courses and an expectation whereby the main method of learning remains individualistic (Aksit, 2007). The national examination system which produces a ranking of schools based on student performance (the system places "good performers" and "bad performers" in separate schools), has resulted in gaps among these schools in terms of the quality of the educational experiences they provide (Nayir, Yildirim, & Kostur, 2009). Criticisms of this approach led to an initiation of a curriculum reform by MoNE in 2014, which promised that student-centered constructivist practices would replace previously didactic practices. However, the current picture shows that the level of satisfaction with this reform is low because the reform has

not achieved the expected results in the immediate short term (Aksit, 2007). Despite this reform, the curriculum hardly provides the flexibility for the participation of "low achievers" throughout the educational phases (Bulut, 2007).

Inclusive education: An opportunity for equitable and meaningful education

Inclusive education assumes the notion that mainstream schools should undergo a process of reform in all aspects of education to accommodate students with a range of individual and educational needs and provide them with appropriate education of high quality (UNESCO-United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009). The movement to develop inclusive education systems is observable around the world and, seemingly, countries are aware of the negative implications of competitive education systems. According to UNESCO (1994) inclusive education should form part of an overall educational strategy and it calls for major reform of the ordinary school. This view was pronounced in the United Nations Salamanca Framework of Action (UNESCO, 1994):

> Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school. (pp. 11-12).

Many education systems which possess scattered and ability-based school structures, expect students and families to adapt to the existing structures of the school. However, according to Ainscow, Howes, Farrell, and Frankham (2003), schools are responsible for accommodating the needs of all students. Once this notion is adopted, it requires education systems to make changes in the existing structures of schools or, when necessary, develop structures and mechanisms which are necessary in order to educate all children, regardless of characteristics or ability levels. However, it is challenging to realize such a system change in traditionally-oriented schools when we consider that schools have had conservative structures that are resistant to change (Skrtic, 1995). In addition, despite an awareness of the negative implication of meritocratic classification of schools, principles of competition and examination which favor those achieving high attainment and marginalize those with low achievement levels still dominate the education systems around the world (Barton & Slee, 1999). Looking at the case presented above, it is not surprising to see that students, teachers and families are often blamed for under-achievement, while only a few realize that the way in which schools are structured and organized accounts for many of the difficulties experienced by students, families and school staff. This shows a definite need to develop pedagogical system in which students' differences are respected and responded to; while these differences are considered as an opportunity, rather than a challenge, to improve the quality of teaching and enhance the level of learning (UNESCO, 2009).

The inclusive education movement in Turkey has never been considered as a reform initiative, despite the chance it provides to educate all students within an equitable and meaningful framework. The movement has been mainly understood as placing disabled students in mainstream schools and expects them to do nothing but develop some communication skills in order to integrate within the school culture. This understanding and practice has been criticized for several reasons, such as the consideration of inclusion as a

placement issue, rather than a collective approach to improvement in education, lack of competent and experienced human resources, lack of professional development opportunities, and school cultures asserting negative attitudes towards diversity (Erkilic & Durak, 2013; Sakiz & Woods, 2015).

Findings of some studies conducted on the position of inclusive education in Turkey have suggested that students with low achievement levels often experience educational failure, indicating a limitation in the practices to include them within mainstream schools (Sakız et al., 2015). This is partly because there is a lack of clarity over the interpretation of and strategies for inclusive education. As said before, the co-existence of an inclusive education policy, albeit only narrowly constructed, and a standards-based policy, creates a paradox in the education system. However, what is urgently needed, as Dyson and Millward (2002) put forward, is a clear statement in the policy supporting inclusive education and making clear the goals for the educational community. Simultaneously, the current system, which has created an examination culture and narrowed learning opportunities, should be evaluated and strategically reformed around principles of inclusive education; collaboration, learning and teaching for all, and the embracement of diversity. Ainscow (2005) claims that the current education systems need an inclusive approach to offer just distribution of educational resources and ensure meaningful participation of all students in the learning environment.

Conclusion and Discussion

From the perspective of efficacy, I follow the idea that learning and development of students can be promoted by educating them in heterogeneous mainstream settings more than can be done achieved in categorized schools and environments (Dyson, 1999). Inclusive education is an opportunity to bring about changes in the structures of education systems to eliminate categorization and exclusion of students who are perceived as unable to satisfy the expectations of a particular school. It can also be a tool for enhancing the variety and quality of the learning experiences in schools and developing professional competencies to achieve this aim (Ainscow et al., 2006).

I claim that inclusive education systems that are committed to participation and cooperation, rather than competition, can focus on implementing practical models in schools and foster children's learning and development in various domains. These models can start at primary schools with the introduction of basic skills such as "developing a positive sense of self, being able to make informed choices about one's own life and self-development" (Dyson et al., 2010), and continue with compulsory secondary education that will consistently add on to the achieved skills and qualifications. To achieve these aims, there is a need to create new learning opportunities which will enable young people to achieve outcomes they personally prefer. In Turkey and many other countries, however, the current system assumes that all students will follow the objectives valued and proposed by the system, and that those with a disadvantaged background should achieve well in the system in order to overcome their limiting conditions.

The overall framework to create a fair and effective system with a lessened impact of ability and competition is provided by Tikly and Barrett (2011). They argue for a three-step-change in education. First, children from different achievement levels, socioeconomic conditions and learning styles are *included* within schools. Second, the system ensures that

all children *participate* actively within the school community and practices. Third, all students are provided with *relevant* and meaningful educational outcomes. For educational outcomes, being meaningful means that students have the freedom, flexibility and opportunity to convert the resources they may have into outcomes or achievements of different kinds (Sen, 2009). This entails that institutional barriers in schools which prevent participation of some students should be eliminated and children should be equipped with the capability, appropriate skills and education to be part of the community. All in all, there is still hope and opportunity for Turkey and countries undergoing similar experiences to transform this increasingly popular idea into successful practices that can result in changes and improvements in the current system.

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