

Full Length Research Paper

A look at mother tongue education in the context of the right to education

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In Turkey, education in state schools can be delivered in foreign languages such as German, French and English. However, mother tongue education cannot be provided in the languages of minorities or local groups other than those officially accepted as minorities (that is, according to the Treaty of Lausanne). In this regard, the primary aim of this study was to reveal the views of postgraduate students (Masters (MA)/PhD) studying at a graduate school of educational sciences on mother tongue education and the applicability of mother tongue education in Turkey. The study was conducted with a total of 46 students, 28 MA and 18 PhD students. The data were gathered through semi-structured open-ended questions in November 2017. According to the findings, most of the participants viewed mother tongue education as one of the basic human rights. Moreover, while some of the participants thought that the country was not yet ready to provide education to non-official minorities or local communities in their mother tongues, some objected to mother tongue education with the concern that it would cause division within the country.

Key words: Education, minorities, mother tongue, right to education, human rights.

INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Turkey (TR) is a unitary state run in accordance with the principal of central government. The curricula are set as common in all schools across the country and implemented by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). However, Turkey is a country in which many ethnic groups including the Kurdish, Laz, Circassian, Arab, Greek, Armenian, and Jewish live alongside the Turkish majority, and thus, a variety of languages are spoken. On the other hand, according to the constitution of the TR (1982, Art 42), "no language other than Turkish can be taught to Turkish citizens as

their mother tongue in educational institutions." In this respect, mother tongue education, which represents an important problem in the country, is discussed at various levels in terms of the administrative structure, strengthening of democracy, human rights, decentralisation policies, citizen demands, and local languages being taught as elective courses in schools.

With the many minorities group and local communities that live together in Turkey, the primary criteria for the concept of minority are ethnicity, language, and religion. Yet, in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the TR established

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that only non-Muslim citizens were minorities, and thus, only they could benefit from international minority protection law (Oran, 2015). Based on this treaty, the official state policy has failed to recognize minority groups other than the Greeks, Armenians, and Jews (Gökçen and Öney, 2008). In this way, the TR, since its foundation, has used its education system as one of the main tools for actualising its nation-state ideology. In the constitution and legislation related to education, the purpose of education has always included ideological references, and loyalty to Turkish nationalism has been put ahead of children's best interests, including their pedagogical development (Kaya, 2015).

Sufficient data regarding ethnic groups could not be collected because citizens were not asked about their "mother tongue" and "the second language they speak" in the censuses in Turkey after 1965. For this reason, the size of the ethnic groups living in the country and their proportions within the total population are not known exactly (Mazlumder, 2011). In addition, tensions between the state and the minorities or local groups that are not assimilated into the "Turkish identity" have forced most of these groups to hide or even deny their own cultural origins completely. Despite this, the tense interactions that sometimes emerge between the minorities or local groups that could not be assimilated to the "Turkish identity" and the state have pushed most of these groups to hide, or even deny completely their own cultural origins. Yet, almost none of the ethnic groups in Turkey see themselves as "minorities" (Gökçen and Öney, 2008). Turkish society and the state have always identified themselves as highly tolerant to differences, helping those in need, and being distant to racism. However, ethnic and religious tensions have at times become commonplace often appeared in the country, and many individuals have been exposed to discrimination. The primary role of making minorities adopt the Turkish identity is attributed to the national education system.

The facts that the Kurds are the largest local community in the country after the Turks and that the region most dominated by this group is economically deprived reduce the impact effect of the education system for this group. Despite the state's pressure to make the Turkish language the official spoken language, traditional practices such as refusing to educate girls by not sending them to school have contributed to the preservation of Kurdish as their mother tongue (Gökçen and Öney, 2008). The current President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has stated that "denial, rejection and assimilation policy" had been following a certain political line against local communities until his party, the Justice and Development Party, came to power in 2002 (Aljazeera, 16 November 2013 and Vatan Daily, 17 November, 2013).

On the other hand, it is difficult to say the same for smaller local communities or minorities in the country. For

instance, the number of the Romani people who speak their native language and use it in daily life is decreasing gradually, while the number of those who describe their ethnic identity as Turks is increasing. Although the rate of those who have abandoned their mother tongue is increasing gradually among the Romani people, they have not been active in demanding education in their native language. In the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger published by UNESCO, the Romani languages are categorized as languages that are clearly in danger of disappearing in Turkey (Alp and Taştan, 2011). Thus, education is of vital importance for the protection of language and culture, and for the transfer of these languages to the next generations. Many international conventions guarantee the right to education for everyone and offer special mechanisms for the protection of minority rights. Learning one's mother tongue, having access to education, schooling in one's mother tongue, and non-discrimination in educational settings are some of the issues that are accepted as important for minorities (Kaya, 2009).

The right to education

Individuals have some indispensable, inalienable, equal and universal rights from birth. One of these rights is the right to education. Education has officially been a human right since the acceptance of Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (UN, 2015) in 1948. It was also emphasised in many human rights conventions across the world such as Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN, 1966) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1981). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UNESCO, 1989) strengthened the concept of the right to education even more. In these documents, it is decreed that all children should be provided with primary education and supported in gaining equal access to high school education. Further, these documents state that fair access to higher education should be ensured, and measures should be taken for individuals who could not complete their primary education. According to these conventions, the purpose of education is to enable personal development, strengthen human rights and freedoms, equip individuals with the ability to effectively participate in a free society, and develop the understanding of tolerance, friendship and consciousness (UNESCO, 2007).

Education, which is a human right and an indispensable tool for actualising other human rights, is necessary for developing individuals' potential, defending human rights, and showing respect to others' rights. It is the primary instrument allowing individuals to overcome poverty and obtain the means to fully participate in societies. The right to education includes learning rights

and responsibilities, civil and political rights, and social and cultural rights (Human Rights in New Zealand, 2010). None of the civilised, economic and social rights can be implemented unless individuals receive a minimum level of education. Education becomes a necessity for the fulfilment of these rights (UNESCO, 2006). The right to education covers not only the access to educational services, but also the obligation to eliminate discrimination in every stage of the education system, set the minimum standards, and enhance quality (UNESCO, 2007). The basic characteristics of the right to education was determined in the General Comment on the Right to Education by the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1999 (Art 13). Four basic principles of the right to education, which are availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability, were specified in this General Comment (UNESCO, 2006).

One of the important resources associated with the right to education is the CRC, to which Turkey became a party in 1995, when it came into force throughout the country (Kaplan, 2015). Turkey approved the CRC with reservations to three articles (Art. 17, 29, 30). It reserves its right to interpret the articles that it did not approve based on the constitution and the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne, and in accordance with their essential intention (Ayata et al., 2010). In these articles, it is mandated that in the states where there are minorities or local populations based on a race, religion and language, children of minorities or local populations cannot be deprived of benefiting from their own cultures and using their own languages with other members of the community they belong to (UNESCO, 1989). In the CRC, the importance of acting for the child's best interest is emphasised, and it is stated that the child should be put at the centre of education. Accordingly, the primary purpose of education is to develop the child's personality, skills and abilities as an individual by taking into account that every child has his/her own unique character, interest, ability and learning needs (Kaplan, 2015).

In Turkey, the Constitution (1982, Art. 42) and the Basic Law of National Education (1973, Art. 7) guarantee the right to education for all citizens. Primary and high school education is compulsory and free in state schools. The state provides scholarships and other aid tools for poor students to continue their education, and takes necessary measures for those who need special education. However, as Alp and Taştan (2011) stated, linking the right to education to citizenship in the Constitution (Art. 42) and the Basic Law of National Education (Art. 7, 23) both contradict the intention of the human rights treaties and may prevent non-citizens from effectively using their right to education.

Discrimination in education

Discrimination refers to when a state or a society

systematically deprives some of its members of certain rights or privileges that are provided to others (Ataöv, 1996). It appears to be a social problem that causes unpleasant results in social life (Demir, 2011). As a social phenomenon, it forms a holistic structure whose individual, social and legal aspects complete each other. It is related to law, justice, equality and especially daily life (Göregenli, 2012). Although it is based on negative feelings, views and judgements about individuals or groups, it refers to a direct "treatment" or "action," which is harmful for individuals. The concept of discrimination needs to be both addressed in the context of social power relations, and associated with the institutional authority of the discriminator. Discrimination gains political meaning by going beyond behaviours such as not behaving fairly, or favouritism due to individual closeness or hostility. It thus includes the treatment based on discriminating between ethnic origins, races, genders, languages, religions, social classes, ages or physical characteristics. Although such treatment is experienced individually, it emerges depending on the rejection or negative perception of a certain collective identity. Those who apply discrimination derive strength from social power relations (Ünal, 2016). In this regard, language discrimination occurs when individuals are treated differently because of their mother tongue or other characteristics of their speech. Institutional discrimination is evident when rules, practices, or understandings of fair treatment systematically provide an advantage or a disadvantage to members of certain groups (Garrett, 2008). Discrimination in education was prohibited in the "Convention against Discrimination in Education" (CaDE) by UNESCO on December 14, 1960. However, Turkey has not yet approved this convention (Ayata et al., 2010).

The most comprehensive regulation on the right to education in international law is the UN "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights" (UN, 1966) of which Turkey is also a party. The states who are parties of this convention commit to guaranteeing the use of the rights stated in the convention without any discrimination based on race, colour, gender, language, religion, political or other views, national or societal origin, property and birth (Kaplan, 2015). This obligation requires the states to provide educational services without discriminating against certain groups based on national or ethnic identity, birth or any other statuses (Kim, 2013). Therefore, education should be accessible to all, with no discrimination on the basis of any prohibited grounds. In respect to the principle of equality, all individuals are equal in terms of rights and have the right to claim their rights without being exposed to any discrimination. Protective measures should be taken to protect the rights and well-beings of marginal groups (UNESCO, 2007). To this end, education should be designed and made accessible by considering the different characteristics and needs of individual children.

However, once access to school is ensured, inequalities may still exist regarding their access to education. In other words, many children may still not have access to education when policies observing differences such as gender, socio-economic class, disability, language-related and cultural differences, and place of residence are not implemented. When differences are not considered, education may even work to reinforce and reproduce social inequalities for children within the education system (Taşkın Alp, 2016). Discrimination is observed due to reasons such as gender, ethnic origin, language spoken and religion in Turkey (Özen Kutanis and Ulu, 2016). As Demir (2011) also noted, there exists an element of discrimination on application forms, in recruitment, and during the occupational evaluation processes in Turkey.

Language problem in education and mother tongue education

Ethnic groups have a common heritage consisting of the memories of a shared historical background as well as cultural, social and language components (Paulston, 1976). Native language is a key characteristic for membership to a group (Cavallaro, 2005). In this regard, language problems in education become prominent for citizens whose mother tongue is different from the official language, as well as for foreigners. The opportunity to learn one's mother tongue and receive mother tongue education is rights that are guaranteed by international conventions. In addition to ensure that children have equal opportunities in education, mother tongue education also includes factors that can enable the transfer of native languages to next generations, strengthen the feeling of equality in society, and lead to the perception of differences as being positive (Kaya, 2015). No other public institution has the capacity to constantly and meaningfully provide these factors to as many young individuals as schools do (Cook and Westheimer, 2006). Knowing the value of cultural similarities and differences as well as being critically aware of issues of racism are essential elements of developing democratic tendencies in students (Spanierman et al., 2008).

Language-based discrimination is prohibited by various international conventions. Yet, language-related regulations are not limited to the prohibition of discrimination. According to Art. 13 of the ICESCR which regulates the right to education, "No provision of this article can be interpreted in a way to restrict individuals' and organisations' freedoms to found and run educational institutions" (UNESCO, 2006). This provision also includes the freedom of establishing educational institutions that would teach native languages, and in which education would be conveyed in non-official languages (Gül, 2009). According to the UN International

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in the states with ethnic, religious or language minorities, individuals belonging to these minorities cannot be deprived of the rights to benefit from their own culture and use their own languages with other members of their groups (UNESCO, 1966, Art. 27). Similarly, according to Art. 30 of the CRC, in the states with language-based minorities or indigenous populations, governments cannot hinder children belonging to minorities or indigenous populations from benefiting from their own cultures and using their own languages with other members of the minority group they belong to (UNESCO, 1989). As is seen, the ICCPR and CRC aim at the use of minorities' or local communities' languages as well as the protection of these languages. It should be noted that a language that is not permitted to be included in the education system would hardly survive (Gül, 2009).

The language-related issues that international conventions touch upon mainly describes "individuals who do not speak their language of instruction" as "not having the opportunity to learn the mother tongue in addition to the official language of instruction" as well as dealing with the "demands for mother tongue education" (Gül, 2009). Studying minority groups' or local communities' receiving (or not being able to receive) mother tongue education has always been seen as a taboo research area in Turkey. For this reason, the scholarly work on mother tongue education has been quite limited. Attempts to provide insights on the issue were mostly made by human rights organisations and non-governmental organisations.

The Kurdish language comes to the forefront with regard to mother tongue education in Turkey. The demand for education in "Kurdish" that intensified in the 2000s turned into a political campaign. Particularly in universities, students submitted petitions and asked for Kurdish education as elective classes. In that period, the actions of those who demanded Kurdish education were not welcomed by the state. While university administrations started disciplinary proceedings for these students, security forces arrested some of them and sent them to courts. For example, 52 of the 69 students who were taken into police custody because of demanding Kurdish education by submitting a petition to Inonu University were released, while 17 of them were sent to the State Security Court for arrest (Avrupa Birliği Bakanlığı, 2002a). A similar situation was also observed with parents. Four of the 15 female parents who were taken into police custody in Batman while trying to submit a petition for "Kurdish education" were arrested (Avrupa Birliği Bakanlığı, 2002b), whereas 29 individuals to 27 of whom were women were taken into custody in Gaziosmanpaşa, Istanbul (Avrupa Birliği Bakanlığı, 2002c). Demanding mother tongue education in this way is usually regarded as damaging to the indivisible unity of the country and nation, providing support to terrorist organisations and participating in terror propaganda

(Human Rights Watch, 2010).

Language is a part of human identity. Inhibiting mother tongue education is perceived as damaging to this identity, and thus, the demand for mother tongue education continues to exist. Therefore, some political parties and organisations have recently called upon boycotting schools in the first week of the school year (Radikal Daily, 2010). On the other hand, legislation was made in 2014 making it possible to open private schools, as subject to the provisions of the "Law on Private Educational Institutions," to provide education in different languages and dialects that Turkish citizens traditionally use in their daily lives (Official Gazette, 19 October 1983, issue: 18196, Additional clauses: 2/3/-6529/Art 11). In the following period, there has been attempts to open schools that provide Kurdish education. Schools were then opened for 60 students in Diyarbakir and 100 students in Cizre (Cumhuriyet Daily, 2014). Yet, these schools did not stay open for long and were shut down by the Governorships within a month (Sözcü Daily, 2016).

Despite this, it was decided that teaching the languages of minorities or local communities under an "elective course" titled "living languages and dialects" in state schools would begin starting from the 2012/2013 academic year. Modifications were made in the middle school curricula in a way to provide elective language courses as two lessons per week. However, in order for these courses to be opened, a minimum of 10 students and an available teacher were prerequisites that had to be met first. In this respect, 53,000 students selected "Kurdish", "Kurmanci", "Zazaki", "Lazuri", "Adyghe language", "Abkhasian" and "Georgian" courses in the 2013/2014 school year, while the rate of the students selecting this classes increased by 45% and reached to 85,000 in the 2014/2015 school year (Hürriyet Daily, 25.01.2015). The open elective courses that were announced by the MoNE in the 2017/2018 school year included "Adyghe language", "Abkhasian", "Kurmanci", "Zazaki", "Lazuri", "Georgian", "Bosnian" and "Albanian" (MoNE, 28 February 2017, document no. 2571505). In spite of this, teachers for these courses are not employed by the schools. For this reason, the elective courses made available are usually determined by school administrators, which prevent students from selecting the course they want.

As explained earlier, mother tongue education cannot be provided in the languages of minorities or local groups that fall outside the ones that are accepted as minorities in the Treaty of Lausanne. In this regard, the primary aim of this study was to reveal the views of postgraduate students (MA/PhD) studying at a graduate school of educational sciences on mother tongue education and the applicability of mother tongue education in Turkey in the context of the right to education. For this purpose, the participants were asked questions on (1) mother tongue education and (2) applicability of mother tongue education in Turkey.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a scientific work that seeks to reveal what postgraduate students think of mother tongue education and its applicability in Turkey. It is a qualitative study conducted by using phenomenological design. In accordance with the nature of qualitative research, phenomenological studies do not reveal accurate and generalizable results. On the contrary, these studies can present examples, explanations and experiences providing results that will help us to identify and understand the phenomenon better (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). Phenomenologic research also intends to identify experiences of individuals regarding a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the researcher preferred to use this methodology.

Participants

The purposive sampling method, which enables in-depth examination of cases that are thought to have rich knowledge of the research phenomenon (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005), was preferred in the selection of participants. In the selection of the participants, studying in the field of educational sciences at a post graduate level (MA, PhD) was the criteria determined by the researcher. So, participants were chosen from postgraduate students at the Graduate School of Educational Sciences in a Turkish university. Forty-six students participated in the study as volunteers. There were 28 MA students and 18 PhD students. 24 of them were female and 22 were male. This study is not interested in the criteria of ethnic origin. In the semi-structured question form, there were not any questions about the ethnic origins of the participants.

Data collection

The data were gathered through semi-structured open-ended questions in November, 2017. A question form including two questions was developed to gather the data. This form was distributed to the participants in person, and the significance of the study was explained so that they would answer the questions sincerely. A question form was developed by referring the literature and the opinions of two faculty members who are experts in qualitative research.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted descriptively based on the participants' statements and linguistic usage, characteristics of the expressions, symbolic expressions, and analogies (Kümbetoğlu, 2005). The data gathered were made digital, and the answers to the questions were arranged in a way to form a whole. The data were then read and examined repeatedly, similar and different perspectives were determined, and the statements that were unrelated to the research topic were excluded. The statements that would be directly quoted were selected in the data, and the quotations were presented adhering to their original structures.

Reliability in qualitative research largely depends on the researcher's care during the processes of data gathering and analysis. The researcher showed as much care in gathering the data as was done while categorising the statements based on similarities and differences. Prior to the analysis, every participant was assigned a number (1.2.3...), and letters for gender as male (M) and female (F), and for educational levels (MA and PhD). For example, the quotation from a statement of the male PhD student number 34 was presented as (34M, PhD), and that of the female MA student number 17 as (17F, MA), both in parentheses.

FINDINGS

The findings were presented under three themes and the categories within these themes.

Theme 1: Everybody should be given the opportunity to receive education in his/her mother tongue (n=17)

Mother tongue education as a basic human right

According to the participants who believed that mother tongue education was a basic human right, education is a concept that has a universal value, and is a human right. Mother tongue education would not pose any problems for the state. Citizens belonging to minorities or local communities should be provided with education in their mother tongue in state schools if they request it. Mother tongue education is of great importance for the preservation of languages that are spoken by relatively small communities in a country. In Turkey, individuals belonging to minorities or local communities are not allowed to receive education in their own mother tongue. Not being able to comprehend their mother tongue adequately and to use it effectively causes negative feelings in individuals. One of the participants expressed this situation as follows: *"I see mother tongue education as a natural right, and necessary for the preservation of a language. As a person who can't read and understand his mother tongue competently, I feel the distress and embarrassment of this"* (6M, MA).

Necessity of mother tongue education

According to the participants who believe in the necessity of mother tongue education, language has a prominent function in transferring the culture and values of a society from one generation to another. Mother tongue education is of significance in terms of one's expressing his/her feelings and views, making sense of his/her life, and making information compatible to his/her life. For some of the participants (particularly those who taught in the southeastern regions of Anatolia, where citizens are mainly of Kurdish origin), individuals who did not start education in their mother tongue cannot achieve the desired school outcomes. Through education, they try to learn, or are forced to adopt, a language that is not native to them, which makes it difficult to reach the teaching objectives. Students who do not receive mother tongue education have difficulty in making sense of "information" and expressing themselves, and feel isolated from the school environment. It is viewed as *"necessary and important for students to be taught in their mother tongue especially in the first stages of education in order to prevent all this and the formation of lost generations"* (17F, MA).

Necessity of a mother tongue education policy

According to the participants who viewed education as a human right, not being able to receive mother tongue education can cause social problems at various levels for minorities or local communities. *"These problems can be observed in the form of assimilation-based conflicts, exclusion and racism."* (6M, MA). To avoid such problems, mother tongue education practices should turn into an education policy that is consistent and sustainable. This issue should not be addressed depending on the changing political climates. *"Every individual must benefit from the right to mother tongue education. Mother tongue education should not be turned into a political issue, neither should it be prohibited or freed based on the political conjuncture"* (39M, PhD). In order for education to be effective, individuals need to state their feelings and views openly and comfortably, which is most possible through their mother tongue. Yet, the country's political line and the conditions that should exist in education sometime contradict each other.

Suggestions for ensuring mother tongue education

According to some of the participants, minorities' rights to use and be taught in their mother tongue should not be restricted in Turkey. In this context, it is observed that there is a tendency to leave mother tongue education to private schools, instead of providing it in state schools. This approach is seen as a practice that increases the inequalities experienced in education, and a violation of a human right. Education, which is provided through elective courses, two lessons per week, *"cannot substitute mother tongue education"* (24F, MA). Therefore, practices should be implemented to provide the necessary conditions for mother tongue education in state schools.

Contrary to international conventions, mother tongue education is prohibited by the constitution and other laws. Moreover, schools do not have teachers trained to teach elective courses on minority or local community languages. Many languages spoken in the country are not included in teacher training programs, and thus, teachers cannot be trained to meet the need in these languages. One of the participants addressed this issue as follows: *"Contrary to the universal declaration of human rights, and conventions on children's rights, the Constitution and the Basic Law on National Education close the door to mother tongue education completely. The elective course practice did not solve the problem. New regulations should be made to adopt an equitable approach in education. Competent teachers should be trained in universities, and they should be able to find employment opportunities"* (46M, PhD).

When individuals from minority groups reach the higher education level after receiving mother tongue education, they should not face inequalities or obstacles. The

education they received should not be an impediment for them, and they should not be disadvantaged in professional life. Mother tongue education should not become a disadvantage in accessing public services for individuals and the society. Those who received mother tongue education should not be marginalised in any institutions, and they should be provided with platforms by which they can express themselves. In this respect, *“how the communication between the civil servants who serve in public institutions and individuals who get service... and whether the language of communication would be multilingual”* should be regulated (34M, PhD).

Theme 2: Mother tongue education is a basic human right, but... (n=19)

Mother tongue education is all right, but not now

According to the participants who regarded mother tongue education as a basic human right, all children have the right to benefit from their right to education. All who request mother tongue education should be provided with it. Mother tongue education *“is important for children to feel valuable and accepted”* (10F, MA). On the other hand, according to some of the participants, providing mother tongue education to individuals from minority groups or local communities seems difficult in terms of practice. *“When the conditions are right, we can implement mother tongue education without damaging our national unity and solidarity”* (21M, MA). But, the country is not yet ready for this, and implementing mother tongue education may cause divisions in society. Today, globalisation has created the necessity to communicate in a common language across the world. Students who receive primary education in their mother tongue should be enabled to focus on English, which has turned into a world language. Despite the existence of ethnic diversity and many different native languages in Turkey, the Kurdish language comes to the fore when it comes to mother tongue education. For this reason, *“when mother tongue education is opened up for discussion, issues such as poverty, discrimination, deprivation and terror also come to the fore. Although it doesn't have any negative aspects in theory, mother tongue education would need decades to be implemented”* (41M, PhD).

Mother tongue education hinders individuals' integration into the society

According to some of the participants, minorities and local communities in the country should be taught Turkish first to meet their social needs and ensure their social integration. The mother tongue can be taught as an elective course with the condition that Turkish is learned. After all, *“minorities need to learn Turkish to meet their needs and integrate with the society”* (28F, MA). Otherwise, minorities having education in their mother

tongue would cause many problems in practice. *“The ties between regions may be weakened”* (45M, PhD). Serious problems can be observed in the process of minorities' social integration, and there may be fractures in the centralised governmental structure of the country. One of the participants who emphasised the importance of language unity for the continuity of the state and solidarity of society expressed his view as follows: *“I think that multiculturalism is an advantage, but it is the most basic human right to learn one's mother tongue alongside the common (official) language, and transfer it to the next generation. However, mother tongue education prevents individuals' integration into a larger section of the society. When a local language becomes dominant in certain regions, this facilitates dissolution in society by cutting of the communication with people in different regions”* (43E, D).

According to some of the participants, mother tongue education for children whose mother tongue is not Turkish cannot be put into practice due to economic reasons and the lack of a qualified labour force. Despite this, it is thought that *“teaching languages other than Turkish to all students would make a valuable contribution to social consensus, and strengthen social unity and solidarity”* (44M, PhD).

Languages other than the official language can be taught as elective courses

According to some of the participants, for adaptation to society, all citizens should learn the official language first, and then, they can be taught their native language as elective courses. For mother tongue education, there should be a social consensus, state schools should be made ready in terms of infrastructure, and teachers who can provide education in the target languages should be available. This is because *“providing education to minorities in their mother tongue may cause problems of ethnic differentiation, alienation and failed integration in the society. For the continuity of the nation, Turkish should be learned first”* (18F, MA). Not having ethnic grouping and alienation in the country depends on the solidarity of national consciousness. The language should be made official for the good of national consciousness, and thus, *“education should only be taught in Turkey as the mother tongue. Minorities can receive education in their mother tongue in addition to Turkish”* (16F, MA). There is no objection to minorities receiving education in their mother tongue in the form of elective courses after learning and being able to properly use Turkish.

Theme 3: No to mother tongue education (n=14)

Minority groups' receiving mother tongue education leads to the division of the country

According to the participants who objected to the idea of

providing mother tongue education in state schools, a common language is the most important determinant of being a unified nation. Different cultures and languages form a cultural mosaic in Turkey. Providing education to minorities or local communities in their mother tongue in state schools “*damages the integrity of the society, disintegrates the unitary structure of the state and causes the division of the country*” (23M, MA). Due to the geography where the country is located and the civil wars or political conflicts in the neighbouring countries, providing education to minorities or local communities in their mother tongue is not approved in terms of the country's security and future. One of the participants touched upon this issue as in the following: “*Mother tongue education can be implemented in private schools, but it is not appropriate in state schools. There are many ethnic backgrounds in Turkey. What if everyone wants the same thing? The most important element of being a nation is a common language. It is not the time, especially when there are civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Ukraine and the Middle East. We should seek integration, not division*” (42M, PhD).

The language education should only be Turkish

According to some of the participants who objected to mother tongue education, the official language of a country should be its language of education. The demands of minorities should not be considered in this regard. “*If the language of education was varied, differentiation would increase in the society, and Turkish would no longer be the common language of communication in the country*” (37F, PhD). Therefore, “*there should be an extra focus on Turkish for children whose mother tongue is not Turkish*” (30F, MA). In states that have a centralist style of government like Turkey, providing education to minorities in their mother tongue may cause significant fractures among ethnic groups in the country. In the case of a social consensus, there is nothing wrong with the demand for mother tongue education. Yet, it is perceived as “*a political demand, a means of pressure and blackmail*” (35M, PhD), and thus, is perceived with a negative attitude.

Mother tongue education is not applicable in the Turkish context

Although some of the participants view mother tongue education as a right, they do not find it applicable in terms of the country's level of development, existing situation and professional life. It seems that “*although it is minorities' natural right to demand education in their mother tongue, its applicability in the country is much, much less likely*” (26M, MA).

Mother tongue can be freely used in daily life, but should not be integrated into the education system

Some of the participants believed that inhibiting minorities from using their language in daily life may lead to various psychological and development problems, which can leave a lasting negative impact on people. That is why “*minorities should be able to freely speak their languages in daily life. But, these languages should not be integrated into the education system*” (32F, PhD). Including the languages of minorities or local communities in the education system “*and children's using a language other than Turkish both at school and at home, especially in elementary school period when they are quite open to learning, would cause difficulty for them in the future*” (31F, PhD). Not learning Turkish and not being able to speak the same language would eventually lead to a miscommunication among people.

DISCUSSION

This study reports postgraduate students' personal evaluations and judgements regarding mother tongue education and its applicability in Turkey. Personal evaluations and judgements are the views that form individuals' subjective knowledge about themselves, their environment and what is going on in this environment. These views include affective elements as well as cognitive elements (Şahin, 2014). The results of this study that are limited to the views of a certain group of participants are comprehensive enough to get an overview of the issue from various dimensions. The present study provides merely a window from which to look at the whole picture.

One of the primary findings revealed in the study is that the opportunity of receiving mother tongue education, which is a basic human right, should be provided to all without considering ethnic background. As also reported by various researchers (Cummins, 2000; Diaz-Rico, 2000; Ramos, 2001), one of the factors that affect minority students' education the most is the use of mother tongue in class. Moreover, the use, literacy and development of language are not limited to classroom activities. In the social context, literacy includes not only the basics of reading, writing, and speaking, but also individuals' creating meaning through personal experiences such as asking questions to one's self and others by using the ties between the language and culture (Helmlberger, 2006). Students' experiences in the mother tongue prior to reading and writing affect learning. In this regard, reading instruction in the mother tongue is a key to success in learning to read in a second language (Watkins-Goffman and Cummings, 1997). As Kaya (2015) states, children who are members of a minority or a local community whose native language is not Turkish are more likely to fail compared to those whose mother

tongue is Turkish due to not being provided with sufficient Turkish language education and having to learn Turkish first in the educational process.

In spite of the emphasis on the necessity of mother tongue education, concerns are also expressed regarding children who are members of minorities or local communities and who receive mother tongue education as they may face inequalities or obstacles when they reach higher education and be disadvantaged in professional life. These concerns are not baseless. One of the main problems that individuals encounter in professional life is discrimination (Demir, 2011). If mother tongue education was provided in schools, there would be a need to create new regulations in education and education policy to address these concerns. However, considering that Turkey's administrative system and, accordingly, its education system have an extremely centralized structure, it can be stated that changing the existing situation is a systemic problem, and the political dimensions overshadow the educational aspects. After all, curricula are centrally developed and implemented without considering population characteristics and cultural, social, or economic statuses of different regions (Karan, 2017). Therefore, providing education to minorities or local groups in their mother tongue would be directly parallel to the country's administrative structure and the society's level of democratisation. Consequently, when it comes to mother tongue education, political discussions are mostly encountered rather than educational issues.

The second primary finding revealed in the study is the emphasis that the country is not yet ready to provide education to minorities or local communities in their mother tongue although mother tongue education is seen as a basic human right. Providing mother tongue education in state schools may create problems in the country. It can hinder the integration of individuals belonging to minorities or local communities into the society. For this reason, education in state schools should be delivered in the official language (in this case, Turkish). At the same time, the languages of local or minority communities other than Turkish can be taught as elective courses. These findings show that the language of education poses an important problem. The traditional view on this issue is based on the assumption that being exposed to the education of the dominant language early would speed up minority students' adaptation to the majority culture, and would increase their chance of competition in mainstream society. The staunch advocates of this assimilationist perspective have usually tried to replace students' mother tongue with the dominant language. The clearest and most dramatic examples of this can be found in the education of American and Canadian Indians' children in the history of North America, but it was also experienced in Turkey and many other countries as well. In heritage schools in Canada and the United States of America, children were

reprimanded, publicly humiliated, and even physically punished for using their heritage language. In fact, suppressing children's heritage language and identity was clearly intentional in many residential and missionary schools (Wright and Taylor, 1995). Considering that a strong advocate of the educational right is the middle class, they have an important responsibility in ensuring mother tongue education. According to Palmer (2009b), who points out that social class has an important effect on education, parents' ability to navigate school systems is related to their education levels. Therefore, educated middle class citizens may be invaluable for the implementation of bilingual education, and play a significant role in advocating bilingual educational curricula.

The third primary finding revealed in the study is that minority groups and local communities should not be provided with mother tongue education in state schools. The language of education should only be Turkish. Mother tongue languages can be freely used in daily life, but should not be formally integrated into the education system. If minority groups and local communities are provided with mother tongue education in state schools, the integrity of the society may be impaired, the unitary structure of the centralized state may be fragmented, and eventually, the country may be divided. These concerns and objections regarding mother tongue education are also shared by the state; in other words, it can be stated that the state's perspective is significantly influential on the participants. This situation makes education in local or minority groups' languages an important problem in terms of its effects on language orientation, language policy, and planning objectives. It also supports the view that language can be seen as a problem, a right, and/or a resource (Ruiz, 1984). As Özsoy (2004) emphasises, the fact that the state established an absolute dominance in the field of education caused all demands for rights related to education to turn into a political demand against the state. For this reason, the problem of the right to education has never been perceived as a mere educational problem in Turkey, which can be observed in Turkey's resistance to approve of the conventions that regulate language rights. In fact, these conventions guarantee minorities' right to learn their mother tongue and to be taught in their mother tongue. However, Turkey did not become a party to the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by refusing to sign these conventions (Alp and Taştan, 2011). Furthermore, the TR Constitution (1982) prohibits the use and teaching of any language other than Turkish as the language of education. The prohibition of mother tongue education is a result of the policies towards the assimilation of ethnic groups. This prohibition means discrimination for citizens with different ethnic backgrounds; whereas, "multilingualism is the

norm around the world. The coexistence and access to multiple languages in society invites an examination of how multiple language sources are negotiated in policy and practice” (Ester et al., 2016).

Based on the results of the current study, the following suggestions can be offered. Comprehensive studies should be carried out with regard to the right to education and mother tongue education. The international conventions that Turkey has not approved yet, and that regulate the right to education and language rights should be approved as soon as possible. The reservations of the international conventions that were approved conditionally should be removed. The articles that prohibit mother tongue education in the constitution and in the legal code should be changed. Children's educational rights and best interests should be prioritized and protected while making educational policies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflicts of interests.

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