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# Rethinking Decentralization in Education in terms of Administrative Problems

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## Abstract

The general purpose of this study is to thoroughly examine decentralization in education according to the literature and previous research, and to discuss the applicability of educational decentralization practices in Turkey. The literature was reviewed for the study and findings reported. It has been observed that decentralization in education practices were realized in many countries after the 1980's. It is obvious that the educational system in Turkey has difficulty in meeting the needs, and encounters many problems due to its present centralist state. Educational decentralization can provide effective solutions for stakeholder engagement, educational financing and for problems in decision making and operation within the education system. However, the present state of local governments, the legal framework, geographical, cultural and social features indicate that Turkey's conditions are not ready for decentralization in education. A decentralization model realized in the long run according to Turkey's conditions, and as a result of a social consensus, can help resolve the problems of the Turkish education system.

**Keywords:** decentralization, educational management, administrative problems, Turkish educational system.

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## Introduction

After globalization and neoliberal mentalities became effective and after considering quality in generating and presenting services, certain reforms in public administration became crucial. It is observed that the field of educational management has also been affected by these reforms. In this sense, decentralization in educational management in many education systems in Europe and several countries have become outstanding. Fiske (1996, p. V) states that these practices became prominent towards the end of the 1980's and during the beginning of the 1990's. Disintegration of the Soviet Union, embracing a free market economy, globalization and privatization implementations popularized the concept of decentralization. When considered under educational terms, the concept of decentralization has a global characteristic. In this sense, effects of educational decentralization are evident in India, which has a large land area, in Burkina Faso, a small country, in Australia and Spain, which are governed by democracy, in Argentina, Chile and many other countries. Today, it is possible to see the effects of decentralization in education in many countries of the European Union.

As for the Turkish education system, it is possible to see the effects of global developments on the education system. However, these effects are not on a large scale (Ulug, 1998). The radical centralized structure of the Turkish education system, the curriculum, planning, making crucial decisions like employment from a single center and not providing the required initiatives to schools and school stakeholders, which are the areas of carrying out decisions, are all issues which are heavily discussed. Opinions have been voiced about how the education system, which has grown into a much larger structure with the increase in the number of schools and personnel, can be more effective. Among these opinions are decentralization practices which aim at providing a bigger area of operation in taking educational decisions to the local authority and non-governmental organizations. It is a key concern to what extent decentralization in education is effective in solving the problem of quality in education.

When today's Turkish education system's governing structure is considered, the consistency between the central unit and the provincial unit has become even more difficult due to the expanding organizational structure and the variety of needs between regions. This has brought about the issue of restructuring the education system. However, how this restructuring process will be carried out with the centralized and unitary structure of the government is a question of debate. With this respect, the general purpose of the study is to offer a general framework on decentralization in education and to question the applicability of educational decentralization practices in Turkey in terms of the related literature and previous studies. In line with this purpose, the related literature will be examined and various suggestions will be offered accordingly.

### Overall Problems of the Turkish Education System in the 21st Century

The Turkish education system is a major system which embodies almost sixteen million students and six hundred thousand teachers. Although there have been applications to develop the system and correct the errors, there are still many structural problems that remain unresolved (Yilmaz & Altinkurt, 2011). The radical centralized structure, which is among these problems, has been expressed many times in previous studies (Balci, 2000; Gulcan, 2003; Gedikoglu, 2005; Yildirim, 2010).

It is obvious that the problems of the Turkish National education system are problems left unresolved for many years. According to Demirtas (1988), the Turkish education system is encountering issues over lack of buildings and installation problems, curriculum problems, education planning problems, preschool education problems and problems in the participation of stakeholders in the administration and decision-making processes. There is a lack of material in schools. Teachers need to be trained better and the qualifications of teachers need to be enhanced. Financing of schools is believed to be a major problem. It is interesting that the stated issues have been left unresolved since 1988. Problems similar to the issues detected by Demirtas 22 years ago were still evident in a similar study conducted by Ekinci in 2010. According to the findings of this study, which was conducted to determine professional problems of school principals and teachers, there are some chronic problems of the Turkish Education System that are critical barriers to attaining educational goals. Schools are inadequate for their physical purposes. The most outstanding physical problems were schools lacking architectural and educational features, the need for classrooms, a lack of settings and spaces for social activities, overcrowded schools and classrooms. It was observed that parents and elements of the school's social environment do not give enough support to schools. The inadequate level of equipment and teaching materials in schools makes it difficult to provide an advanced form of education. Opinions expressed in the study stated that the education system lacks healthy and satisfactory supervision and assessment. The findings indicate that in-service training activities oriented to school administrators and teachers are not also insufficient (Ekinci, 2010).

According to Sisman (1995), the main reason why the Turkish education system cannot renew itself is due to radical centralization and lack of engagement. It has become inevitable for our schools, which are losing their identities due to unsound legislation and cumbersome bureaucracy and which are being managed from a single center, to restructure themselves in order to gain a new identity and a new mission (Sisman, 1995). It is obvious that the restructuring process will not be easy. However, once the education system is approached as a government policy together with introducing permanent and radical reform, rather than short term fixes, the educational restructuring process will be made possible.

The Ministry of National Education (MONE) changing hands at short intervals and each new government following different education policies has led to educational instability. New practices introduced are never long-lasting when the ministers of national education regularly change. Because the education system is not settled and performs the expected services at only a minimum level, each new government/Minister of National Education finds it necessary to make yet further changes. The main problem here is that the national education system has become an area in which many changes have occurred over a long period of time without consultation of parents, students and the other stakeholders. Although these changes directly affect the lives of students and parents, the participation of students, parents and teachers are not taken into consideration during the decision-making processes (Gur & Celik, 2009, p.12).

It is known that critical problems occur when attempting to solve problems regarding Turkey's education system with a centralized approach. In fact, there have been various comments stating that the Ministry of National Education itself is turning into a trouble-maker, having become an increasingly bulky and ungovernable structure. Along with discussions on downsizing the government and redefining its functions, there is also a need

to furnish the ministry with a more functional structure, delegate authority to provincial administrations, detect and solve problems, enable high levels of public participation in education management and decision-making processes (Sisman & Turan, 2003).

With regards to the relevant literature, problems of the Turkish education system over many years can be listed as:

- The radically centralized and bureaucratic structure;
- Failure to satisfy the need for buildings, facilities, equipment and classrooms;
- A lack of quality in planning, curriculum and education processes;
- Issues regarding teacher competences;
- Weak/insufficient participation of stakeholders in making decisions for educational policies and educational management;
- In-service training needs of the educational personnel;
- Financial problems of schools.

According to Ulug (1998), the main reason why the education system has lost its problems-solving power is the centralist management and centralist functioning order. The power to take decisions concerning educational practices should gradually be transferred to sub-units, thereby enabling the service to be carried out more effectively. Based on the division of duties principle, local administration units should be provided with duties that will enable them to participate in the functioning of the education system. Similarly, the duty of MONE, which is the top organization of the system, should be limited at the macro level to the promotion of general education frameworks with duties like planning the education, conducting practices, determining results and taking remedial measures. Thus, the central organization should be downsized, similar duties should be combined in order to prevent functional overlaps and an effective organizational structure appropriate with the system's approach should be created.

## Educational Decentralization

It has recently been observed in developed countries that by moving away from centralization in educational management, the authority of local administrations, educational authorities, schools and parents have been expanded in the decision-making process. There has been an outstanding effort to enable a high level of participation in enhancing and restructuring school systems. In fact, these resent efforts have been brought to the agenda as school-oriented management, *restructuring in education and school management.* Political and economic developments also affected the educational field; various opinions, which were a matter of discussion when transferring to deliberative democracy from representative democracy, gave pace to efforts in creating democratic and liberal policies in education (Sisman & Turan, 2003).

Due to these developments and the problems within the Turkish education system, management system models came on to the agenda which are more effective and more productive in educational management such as local administration, decentralization, school based management, and which aim at enabling public participation in issues regarding schools. Thus, it can be said that decentralization discussions are not artificial and are based on needs (Kurt, 2006). As a result of these discussions, the balance between the central

administration and the local administration has been reshaped over the last 15-20 years. By expanding education administrators' and school administrators' authorities at the local level, local administrators' responsibilities and accountabilities increase. While the level of flexibility and authority increases in practice, observation and evaluation of quality and success standards at the national level by central administration becomes easier (TED, 2007, p.84).

Like in many other fields, regulations that are required for the changes in the Turkish education system are initiated and conducted by centralized government. Accordingly, educational union and educational systemization was promoted and the foundations of a modern education system were laid. This way, major developments were promoted in education. However, it is evident that the present system and governing structure cannot satisfy the needs and solve the problems (Kurt, 2006). One of the suggestions directed to solving these problems was about carrying out decentralization practices in education.

Decentralization refers to delegating centralist authorities on decision making, planning and public service operations to a local organization or institution (Litvack, Ahmad, & Bird, 1998, p.6; Poteete, 2004; Usluel, 1995; Arslan & Atasayar, 2008; Kessy & McCourt, 2010). The World Bank defines public decentralization as passing centralist authorities and responsibilities to the private sector, non-governmental organizations, or to local administration units which are at a lower level. The purpose of decentralization in the public sector is to enhance productivity, democratization, accountability, and equality in delivering services, participation in decision making, decreasing the workload of the central government in order to minimize its responsibilities (World Bank, 1999; Limi, 2005; Cinkir, 2010). Winkler and Gershberg (2000) state that decentralization in education focuses on discussions to redefine to what extent educational financing, effective use of sources and productivity and the power of decision making will be. When considered from this point of view, decentralization promotes managerial effectiveness and flexibility. In addition, by giving citizens the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, their cultural and educational needs will be met more easily (Florestal & Cooper, 1997, p.1).

Decentralization in education aims at increasing stakeholder satisfaction and the quality of educational outputs by considering local priorities and values. Increasing the autonomy of schools will lead to a transparent governance and hold schools responsible for sourcing and their educational outputs (Barrera-Osori, Fasih, Patrinos, & Santibanez, 2009, p.97). Decentralization in education also brought about the School Based Management approach. In the school based management approach, the decision-making authority on issues concerning the curriculum, education-training, the administration and finance is distributed to three separate units by the central body. Increasing school affectivity is taken into consideration (Gropello, 2006, p.4; Cheng, 1996, p.43). The school based management system has been in effect in countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA for longer than 25 years. Different forms of the system have been practiced in Israel, China, the Netherlands and Hong Kong. According to several studies, with the school based management system students' parents are also included in the decision-making process and have become more interested in the school as a result, and this has led to a positive change in school dynamics (Barrera-Osori et al., 2009, p.9-12).

According to Keskin, who claims that educational decentralization will destroy educational unity, the Directive on Education Zones and Education Boards is one of the

decentralization steps in education. There are 1,516 education zones across Turkey, created for the common use of infrastructure, equipment, personnel, social complexes and other facilities of schools. With the 'school student board' the students, the 'school group leader board' the teachers and the 'education zone advisory board', the neighborhood local administrators (known as 'muhktars') and NGO representatives have become involved in decisions concerning education (Keskin, 2008). Despite these developments, the absolute power and authority of MONE on the function of schools continues. Decisions on issues concerning the curriculum, planning, budget, teacher employment etc. are still taken and implemented by the central administration. Opinions have been stated that this prevents the decision making system from operating in a flexible and speedy manner.

According to the development plans, due to the bureaucratic structure and increase in the workload of the government, the central administration fails at some point to solve problems. Thus, the legal and institutional regulations related to educational management that are in plan to be carried out, are stated in the Five Year Development Plan (State Planning Organization [DPT], 2011) as follows:

*"Regulations in the Ministry of National Education Organizational Law will be made to promote a structuring in national education according to the service principle; to set the central organization at the macro level as the top decision making body on strategic planning, curriculum, research-development, supervision and coordination issues; to decrease bureaucracy; to delegate authority and responsibility to ministerial provincial units and local administrations; to enable the Ministerial provincial organizations, local administrations and families to actively participate in the educational service process."*

Most of the solutions offered for the problems detected with the development plan were not implemented. Legal regulations which would delegate authority and responsibility to local administrations were not performed.

### Positive and Negative Outcomes of Decentralization in Education

Together with opinions that find educational decentralization necessary and beneficial for the country, there are also views which claim that this process will put our national education system in danger. According to Basaran (1996, p.46), educational decentralization can help public to better embrace the school. With decentralization, programs that will meet the needs of the environment can be prepared and implemented, the competition which takes place between schools under local administrations can stimulate the public to help enhance their schools and more effective solutions can be generated for educational and administrative issues by creating rational relationships between schools and families (Turkoglu, 2004).

Supporters of educational decentralization believe that quality and effectiveness in education is possible through decentralization. Accordingly, local authorities generate more permanent and better solutions to local problems than do the central government (Winkler, 1993, p.114). These are positive outcomes of giving authority to local administrations about implementing educational services; in other words, decentralization in education means that:

- Schools will compete to provide education-training services of better quality. This would mean education of a higher quality;

- The problem of sources can be reduced by better exploiting local potential and present sources can be more effectively and correctly used;
- Public participation and contribution will increase while carrying out educational services. Stakeholders can make bigger contributions to education with the sense of 'my school';
- The school's education program will comply with the needs of the student, society, and with environmental features;
- Teachers and the other personnel can be motivated to work more effectively;
- The quality of service and supply sourcing can be monitored by local administration, and by the public;
- It would enable flexibility in practice and compliance to environmental conditions;
- Stakeholders will participate in decision-making processes, and this would contribute to the development of democracy;
- Substantial solutions can be offered to local problems. Thus, delays, bureaucracy and increase in costs due to the function of centralist administrations would diminish;
- Educational inequalities will be redressed and the effectiveness of the education system will increase (Lewis, 1989; Usluel, 1995, p.11-13; Hanson, 1996, p.26; Basaran, 1996, p.46; Peterson, 2000; Kurt, 2006).

The main purpose of requiring contribution of local administrations in education is to help society prosper and to reduce bureaucratic problems that occur at the centralist level. In addition, providing better education opportunities for students; management, financing, student policies; giving decision making and supervision authorities about the curriculum and personnel to society can be listed among these purposes. However, these are a significant number of people who oppose local administration institutions, who fail to solve their own problems, to undertake extensive duties and responsibilities (Kurt, 2006).

Along with the benefits of substantial administration, such as the decreasing of bureaucratic delay, reducing the burden of central administration, meeting the educational needs of the local community in a rapid and economic way, there are also some disadvantages. Among these disadvantages are educational standards divergent between regions, difficulty of coordinating local administrations, the leading local community members having a voice over local organizations, the administrators, who were selected through elections, avoiding educational services and showing a predisposition to aid other services that are the major interest of the public (Usluel, 1995).

Hanson (1998) states that the different educational policies that local authorities will implement as a result of educational decentralization practices will destroy educational integrity. For instance, inequalities between teacher wages, implementing curriculum in different ways, the schools opening and closing at different dates can be problems for educational integrity. Bray (1996, p.30) underlines the problem of teacher competences in educational decentralization practices. Favoritism in personnel recruitment can take place in rural regions especially. Local authorities can resort to lower cost personnel recruitment and compromise on quality. In order to prevent this, specific standards should be determined for personnel recruitment. Programs should be conducted in order to increase the qualities of

the current personnel. It has been asserted that decentralization practices will face difficulties in developing countries. The reason for this is stated to be lack of local capacity. Decentralization in rural regions that are distant from big cities, will embody disadvantages for the field of education. Therefore, the personnel working in these regions should gain more financial support (Edquist, 2005, p.16; Peiro, 2006, p.30).

The negative outcomes that educational decentralization can bring about are as follows:

- It is difficult to follow a single policy;
- There can be difficulties in the coordination of decentralized organizational units;
- Administrators who were selected during local elections can value flamboyant services which give results in the short run and avoid long term services;
- Quality of the service may fail to be national;
- Inequalities and instabilities can be evident in educational expenditures;
- Decentralization may threaten national unity and integrity, and;
- Legitimate or illegitimate influence over ideological, religious, or political interest groups may increase (Usluel, 1995, p.13-15).

The issue that decentralization in education counterparts are concerned about, is that the unitary structure of the government will be damaged after decentralization. When the geographical, cultural and social diversities of Turkey is considered, these concerns can be considered valid.

### Turkey's Current State in Educational Decentralization

Increasing educational opportunities is not only the duty of the government. One of the duties of local administration is to ease the lives of people who reside in the region and to provide them with a good standard of living. Putting into effect the related regulations and increasing the responsibility of local administrations in terms of seeking place and source for educational institutions will contribute to the expansion of education (TED, 2007, p.73). According to Fiske (1996), for decentralization to be successful as a management policy, the community should make a compromise. Latin American countries encountered many problems while practicing decentralization policies and programs because they didn't seek stakeholder opinion or the publics' support. For instance, although Brazil tried various means to decentralize education, educational quality did not increase and sourcing could not be achieved due to regional diversities. Giving the authority to local administration before furnishing the poorest of regions also prevented source and quality change in Chile (Litvack & Seddon, 1999). When Turkey is considered, a social negotiation is required for an extensive decentralization reform. In addition, with the current state of local administration, it lacks the required amount of information and background for educational financing, personnel selection, employment and personnel training.

Turkey's goals regarding decentralization in educational services are expressed in five year development plans and national education councils. For instance, in the National Education Council in 1996, downsizing central administration, increasing the participation of local administration in education, delegation of authority and local engagement in educational financing were set as goals. In addition, the aim of the 'education zones' practiced at the beginning of the 2000's, gave voice to local stakeholders (Ozdemir, 2008).

The centralized structure in the education system is still in effect despite these developments. Yalcinkaya (2004) states that administrators must have extensive knowledge on this issue in order to solve the current problems faced by the education system and to expand a local structure. With this respect, efforts on school based administration approaches, total quality management and strategic planning implementations in education have been carried out. However, despite these efforts, it is hard to say that the schools within the Turkish education system have visions, missions and core values that have been determined for future participation.

By considering Turkey's conditions and dynamics together with the concern for the unity of the Turkish community, Balci (2000) underlines that it is crucial for the central administration to be effective regarding the main objectives, strategies, plans and programs of the National Education System. On the other hand, local administration can at least be more effective in selecting and appointing the administrative personnel. Local units should not be expected to be authorized from the very beginning. Authority of local units can be increased as the benefits of the trials are observed. Giving the schools of the local community more financial support can promote participation and solve financial problems of schools.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

The purpose of this study was to offer a general framework on decentralization in education, and to question the applicability of educational decentralization practices in Turkey in terms of the related literature and previous studies. The centralist administration which was prevalent following the 1980's paved the way for reforms which focused on decentralization. The Turkish education system, which is organized according to a centralist understanding, is moving toward an administration where local agents (private sector and NGO's) gain more of a voice. Thus, the discussion on whether or not centralization or decentralization is better is still prevalent in the academic field. However, it is evident that both models have positive and negative outcomes (Litvack et al., 1998; Ozdemir, 2008).

The fact that academic discussions on whether decentralization in education will bring about positive or negative outcomes still continue, and can be related to the different findings of research conducted on this issue. For instance, in the study titled School Principal Opinions on Substantial Administration that Turan et al. conducted in 2010, it was evident that educational administrators did not want regions, provinces, or municipalities to be overactive in educational decentralization; and that they didn't accept these units as decision-making bodies. According to the study conducted by Arslan and Atasayar (2008), over 70% of educational administrators and supervisors believe that it would be beneficial to decentralize the authorities of the Ministry of National Education central organization. In addition, there are also concerns stating that decentralization will cause social inequalities, that if the central administration's authorities are decentralized, then the potential of the society will affect educational management according to their own interest, and as a result it would be even more difficult to enable impartiality in education.

It is obvious that reforms regarding substantial education and decentralization depend on legal and radical changes. However, these reforms cannot be implemented with only legal regulations. A decentralization model appropriate for Turkey's conditions, and in which all stakeholders express their opinion and make compromises, can contribute to solving

educational problems. According to Duman (1998), it would be wrong to give authority and resources to local administrations without developing local administration institutions. Thus, it would be wrong to pass on a radical change, such as substantial educational management, to current local administrations. The substantial management approach, which was offered to attain specific goals, will not achieve its goals without core reforms aiming at resolving central problems. Otherwise, it can just increase the instabilities, or lead to undesired outcomes.

It may be beneficial to create a balance between decentralization in education and centralization, and to promote provincial organizations in order to make speedy decisions whilst considering environmental factors. The effectiveness of today's education institutions depends on the flexibility, level of participation in making decisions, and their skills for responding to environmental changes. Seeking a new model appropriate for Turkey's conditions by considering decentralization in education is a potential initiative to resolve current administrative problems. However, a model which does not copy the examples of Europe or the USA, and which complies with Turkey's conditions and is practiced after a consensus can be successful.

## Notes

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