

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
of
CONTEMPORARY
EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

JCER

International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research (IJCER)

www.ijcer.net

Teaching or testing, which matters more? Transition among education levels in Turkey

Erdem Aksoy¹

¹TED University,  0000-0002-8395-1738

Article History

Received: 08.02.2023

Received in revised form: 01.06.2023

Accepted: 06.06.2023

Article Type: Research Article



To cite this article:

Aksoy, E. (2023). Teaching or testing, which matters more? The transition among education levels in Turkey. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 10(2), 470-483. <https://doi.org/10.52380/ijcer.2023.10.2.376>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes.

According to open access policy of our journal, all readers are permitted to read, download, copy, distribute, print, link and search our article with no charge.

Authors alone are responsible for the contents of their articles. The journal owns the copyright of the articles.

The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of the research material.

Teaching or testing, which matters more? The transition among education levels in Turkey

Erdem Aksoy^{1*}

¹TED University

Abstract

This study analyzes the alignment between the educational policy of Turkey and high-stakes tests administered for students transitioning from secondary to high school. Research questions focus on the opinions of secondary school teachers about the alignment between transit exam questions and curricula, course books and materials, and their views on high-stakes testing. The research used a survey study model utilizing the triangulation design. A total of 109 teachers from six different majors working in Ankara participated in the study. An online survey consisting of eight questions was used to get teachers' opinions. The research question was analyzed using quantitative (percentages) and qualitative (content analysis) methods. Results showed that education serves dominantly for tests emphasizing a testing-oriented education system in the current Turkish learning and teaching process, which contrasts with education policy documents targeting 2023.

Keywords: Educational policy, High-stakes tests, Transition among education levels, Alignment between educational policy and high stakes tests.

Introduction

Educators, principals, families, and state education departments have been familiar with the international PISA and TIMSS tests since they were first launched in 2000 and 1995, respectively. Each year, country reports for global test results are published, laying out the success levels of students in reading, mathematics, and the sciences. Thus, it is not surprising that countries with high scores in these tests have been thoroughly investigated while other countries that fall below the OECD rankings have searched for ways to improve their scores for "accountability."

In a competitive world where international multiple-choice tests compare the success levels of students, it is not surprising to observe educational systems driven by this high-stakes testing paradigm. As Wheatley (2015) suggests, academic terminology started to refer to students as customers and principals as CEOs in schools. According to Wheatley (2015), market economy influences on schools have been financially advantageous for corporations that have long considered schools a threat to corporate ideology. Accountability policies and high-stakes tests re-conceptualized education with a strong market orientation, which had an essential effect on the political agenda (Hacker & Pierson, 2010).

Test-Driven Education and the Problems of High-Stakes Testing

Test-driven education includes pedagogical practices and activities and after-school tutoring services aiming to prepare learners for standardized tests and high-stakes exams and, by extension, to cover all types of exams and tests (Bemoussat & Bouyakoub, 2019). The need for test-driven education and high-stakes tests deserves significant attention and questioning. In countries with a social state, selection and/or elimination of excessive quotas are not required since no significant quality differences can be found among public schools. However, in countries with differences among public schools regarding quality, prestige, opportunities, and capacity, students are selected through exams (Atilgan, 2018). Emery and Ohanian (2004) comment that the corporate players have a significant role in the move toward accountability. Accountability based on tests has been profitable for corporations, as it limits curricula and assessments to corporate products. Standardized tests and test preparation materials have helped certain corporations earn lots of money (Wheatley, 2015).

* Corresponding Author: *Erdem Aksoy*, erdem.aksoy@tedu.edu.tr

In certain countries, such as Korea, where academic achievement in high-stakes tests determines the future lives of their students, academic achievement is salient not only for kids but also for their families (So & Kang, 2014). As a result, teaching to the test or for the test dominates the learning-teaching process, limiting student learning solely to test items (Sung & Kang 2012). A similar case is observed in China, where the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE) has ruled China's educational system and shifted the purpose of education to test preparation, where the system overshadows every household (Wang, 2020). A similar exam process can be found in Vietnam, where the education process is based on a test-driven paradigm (Pham, 2021).

The literature illustrates the drawbacks of high-stakes testing in education. One drawback is termed score inflation. According to Hamilton (2011), teachers tend to shift their teaching methods to aim to cover the test items; thus, students succeed in these tests in the short run. Thus, parents push their children to compete with tested content even in kindergarten. As higher scores mean better colleges, students, parents, and principals become obsessed with test preparation, which has created a growing private tutoring industry (Xue & Ding, 2009). Wang (2020) states that the Chinese Ministry of Education has forbidden teachers in public schools to offer these services, but it has allowed institutions outside of the school system to provide them. A very striking and extreme case from Vietnam reports that some students committed suicide because they failed the university entrance tests (Pham, 2021).

The overemphasis on testing and assessment has thus turned teachers into test specialists, devoting their classroom time to test preparation. Under these circumstances, teachers might ignore extracurricular activities, alternative assessments such as portfolios, and activities to foster reasoning and critical thinking skills core to real learning (Bemoussat & Bouyakoub, 2019). In addition, Musoba (2011) states that high-stakes testing negatively affects student and teacher morale and increases their stress levels.

Turkey is no exception. Turkey has been reforming the education system, including curriculum changes in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, changes in the transition of education levels, and the national tests administered in secondary and high schools (OECD, 2020). The reform movements on education and assessment policies can be found in the 11th Turkish Development Plan and 2023 Education Vision documents.

11th Turkish Development Plan and 2023 Vision for Education Document

The Eleventh Development Plan (2019-2023, which will be referred to as DP) was approved in the 105th plenary session of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on July 18, 2019, by the provision of Law No. 3067, dated October 30, 1999. Designed as the first five-year part of a fifteen-year perspective, the Development Plan envisages an overall change and breakthrough in all fields and a resolute and uninterrupted implementation in the long-term perspective (DP, 2019). One of the pillars of the DP focused on quality education and set forth the expectations for education in the next five years. The main objective of education was stated (DP, 2019, p. 138):

The primary objective is to raise happy and productive individuals who have advanced thinking, perception, and problem-solving skills, self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, entrepreneurial and innovative peculiarities, internalized democratic values and national culture, are open to sharing and communication, have a strong sense of arts and aesthetics, and are skilled at using technology by enabling access to comprehensive and qualified education and lifelong learning opportunities for all individuals.

To achieve this objective, specific policies and measures were called for. The ones concerning the relationship between education and assessment are notable. First, the document states that the disparities in success among schools will be reduced by increasing the quality and facilities of schools at all levels of education (p. 140). This is a challenging target, considering this disparity has evolved over many decades. Next, it states that an efficient measurement, monitoring, and evaluation system will be established to diversify and increase the students' educational attainments and form teaching programs as a flexible, modular, and applied structure. The assessment and evaluation system will be strengthened based on competence. (p.141) More importantly, the document cites that to reduce the pressure created by the education system on the students, arrangements will be made for the exams held for the transition between educational levels.

The 2023 Vision for Education Document (VFO), prepared in the frame of the 11th Development Plan, is another salient document showing the relationship between education and assessment policy. The basic policy of the VFO (2021) document revolves around an individual's progress toward self-knowledge, which implies

that he or she has created a customized roadmap for his or her educational journey (p. 21). The document blames packaged curricula for being compulsorily uploaded into children's minds like boxes to be filled. Teachers are responsible for monitoring and evaluating learning without causing any fear or pressure, treating evaluations as instruments to improve the learning process. In all evaluation processes, teachers are on the side of the students, not against them (p. 22). The document further envisions that the models will also offer customized experiences for each student and help students control their learning processes, assuming responsibility for their own learning (p. 33). Thus, based on the DP, VFO aims to establish a measurement system where each student will be evaluated based on personal development rather than comparing him or her, as in national high-stakes tests. Regarding level transitions among education levels, the VFO states that the ministry's medium-term goal for transition to secondary education and higher education is to reduce the need for competition and elimination-oriented exams. Two pillars were framed for this purpose (p. 33–34). The first pillar includes reducing the disparities between schools and regions. In addition, the second pillar consists of developing flexible models for exam-free placement and using central exams only for specific purposes. Thus, on the one hand, the Ministry of Education (MoNE) declared to reduce the success differences within and among schools. On the other hand, it aims to use alternative assessment methods more than centralized, high-stakes tests. The VFO document also targets reducing the need for private tutoring institutions, which have been shut down, and private document centers, which are still in operation, originating from the existence of a multiple-choice exam system that is predominantly competition- and elimination-oriented (p. 34).

Secondary School High Stakes Testing System in Turkey

In Turkey, the education system is highly examination-oriented. Therefore, the performance of the students, teachers, and even schools at each ring of the system is evaluated by student performance on various exams. (Hatipoğlu, 2016).

In recent years, the transition system to high school from secondary school has changed many times. Secondary school curricula changed in 2005, 2012, and 2017 based on constructivist and active learning theories (MoNE, 2017; TTKB, 2017). The transition to certain prestigious high schools, namely science, social, Anatolian, Anatolian teacher training, and Anatolian imam preacher, was based on student scores at high school entrance exams. In 2005, this exam was named OKS (exam for transfer to high school). In 2008, it was renamed SBS (exam for placement). In these high-stakes tests, students got tests at the end of 6-7-8th grades, comprising 70% of their final grades. The other 30% belonged to overall school success grades. In 2013, the exam was renamed TEOG (transition exam from fundamental to secondary education). In 2018, the exam was renamed LGS (transition to high school exam). The latest LGS exam measured reasoning ability and logic within the framework of the PISA and TIMSS exams. While successful students can enroll in prestigious high schools, unsuccessful students may enroll in address-based local schools. The exam comprises six lessons and is conducted in two sessions at the end of 8th grade (Çelik, 2015).

The central government closed the long-prevailing private courses that prepare students for the tests in 2014, stating that these private courses violate educational equality, especially for poor children. Then, in 2015, public schools offered free courses to better prepare students for high-stakes tests. In addition, students willing to take these courses could study at the weekends in their schools with their teachers.

Meanwhile, although these courses have been offered free at public schools since 2015, private educational institutions for test preparation purposes were not closed down; only their names were changed to study centers. As a result, there are currently 2538 private study centers under various names. These centers officially serve one course; however, it is well known that they serve as test preparation centers for all courses (Aydın, 2021). Thus, private courses are still dominating the market, floating educational inequality.

Despite all these private courses and the money families spend on national high-stakes tests, students have been unsuccessful in these tests. Table 1 shows the student success levels in the LGS exam for the last three years.

Table 1. 2019–2021 student success at LGS exams (SETA, 2021)

| Test | Number of questions | 2019 mean score | 2020 mean score | 2021 mean score | Change in mean scores |
|------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Turkish | 20 | 11,75 | 10 | 9,41 | ↓ |
| History | 10 | 6,88 | 5,05 | 5,23 | ↔ |
| Religion | 10 | 6,83 | 6,39 | 6,35 | ↓ |
| Foreign language | 10 | 4,65 | 3,53 | 4,93 | ↔ |
| Mathematics | 20 | 5,09 | 4,89 | 4,20 | ↓ |
| Sciences | 20 | 9,97 | 10,21 | 8,04 | ↓ |

As seen in Table 1, student scores consistently decreased in Turkish, religion, and mathematics courses, and this decrease in student scores is noteworthy. On the other hand, they almost stayed the same in science, history, and foreign languages.

Literature Review

There are some studies in Turkey regarding the problems of educational policies. For example, Gedikoğlu (2005) stated that the most critical problem in the education system is the lack of sustainability in educational policies. Large-scale, high-stakes tests were stated as the prime reason for this lack. Kartal (2013) similarly offered that centralized, high-stakes tests had to be abandoned to improve Turkey's measurement and evaluation system. In another salient study, Neyişi et al. (2020) found that the second most crucial problem for teacher candidates, according to media news, was about educational policies, and they offered to improve the current educational policies. Finally, in an international study, Jackson (2020) examined socioeconomic inequalities at the critical transition points in the Russian system, asked whether there is evidence that high-stakes tests play a unique role in producing inequalities in transition taking, and found out that high-stakes standard tests have close relations with socioeconomic inequalities.

Some salient Turkish studies are being conducted in the Turkish context on high-stakes transition tests from secondary to high schools until 2021. Atılgan (2018) states that in Turkey's experience in transition among levels for more than half a century, rapidly changing systems have resulted in some harmful outcomes, which can be listed as nonfunctioning schools and the curriculum, excessive utilization of exam preparation resources outside the school, increased gaps in the quality differences among high schools, constant exam stress and pressure, and selection of schools, majors based solely on the exam score. Aslan (2017) concludes that the education level of families and their yearly expenditures on education are important factors. This research shows that student success increases when family education and yearly expenditures increase. Şad and Şahiner (2016) investigated the views of students, teachers, and parents about the high-stakes testing system called TEOG, launched in the 2013-2014 school year. They found that the need for private courses and tutoring remained a significant drawback. Although the literature is rich in showing teachers' points of view on high-stakes tests in Turkey, there is a significant gap in showing the alignment between educational policy and accurate assessment implementations in the context of high-stakes tests. Another salient study by Kumandaş and Kutlu (2010) showed that the transition exams test-takers get to enroll in prestigious high schools fall short of reflecting the students' achievement in real-life situations. In addition, writers warned that the test creates adverse effects on students, such as fear of being unachievable, test anxiety, and some health problems.

Problem

In the 11th Turkish Development Plan and 2023 Vision for Education Document, both salient policy-making documents for the following educational initiatives to be followed by the MoNE schools, skills such as advanced thinking, perception, and problem-solving, as well as self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, internalized democratic values, and national culture, are emphasized. In addition, both documents emphasize forming teaching programs as a flexible, modular, and applied structure and strengthening the assessment and evaluation system based on competence. To reduce the pressure created by the education system on the students, specific arrangements were promised to be made for the exams held for the transition between educational levels. The medium-term goal for the transition to secondary and higher education was to reduce the need for competition and elimination-oriented exams (DP, 2019; VFO, 2021).

On the other hand, exam-driven, high-stakes tests are gaining more importance, especially among level transitions from secondary to high school and from high school to university. In Turkey, students' success in high-stakes tests is publicly advertised nationwide. Thus, an important question needs to be answered based on research: "Could the expectations on assessment stated in education policy documents be actualized in reality?" For quite a long time in Turkey, national transit tests from secondary to high schools were criticized, stating that the questions in the exams were not aligned with the curriculum changes of 2012 and 2018 and that they mostly asked for lower levels of rote learning. With the latest exam type change in 2018, questions were criticized for asking students to think more analytically based on reading comprehension and requiring more time to answer the questions successfully. In addition, many teachers complained that students were not ready for such a radical change in the exam type. Thus, this study will fill an essential gap in the literature by analyzing teachers' opinions from various domains on the latest secondary school exam type (LGS) change since 2018. In addition, the alignment between educational policy documents and high-stakes tests will be explored.

Aim

This study aims to analyze the alignment between the expectations on assessment stated in educational policy documents and LGS high-stakes tests for transitioning from secondary to high school based on secondary school teachers' opinions. Through an online questionnaire consisting of eight open-ended questions, such variables as components of the educational processes, reasons for the success or failure of students in such tests, and the actualization of policy expectations were analyzed. This study, then, aims to reveal whether high-stakes tests (LGS) are a means or an end in themselves. In addition, teachers' opinions toward a better alternative for high-stakes tests were explored.

The research question in the study is:

1. What are the opinions of secondary school teachers about the
 - a. alignment between the questions asked in the LGS exam and the knowledge and skills presented in the curriculum,
 - b. alignment between questions asked in the LGS exam and the compulsory course books and materials,
 - c. usefulness of sample LGS exam questions,
 - d. importance of curriculum components,
 - e., emphasis on teaching or testing,
 - f. reasons for success or failure of students in the high school entrance exam in the last three years,
 - g. alternative criteria for the transition to high schools,
 - h. impact of managers and families on the success/failure of students on the LGS exam?

Method

This research was conducted based on a survey study model to reveal the opinions of secondary school teachers about the stakes tests. Triangulation was adopted in this study, in which the researcher used quantitative and qualitative data to study the same phenomenon to determine if the two converged upon a single understanding of the research problem. In this research, quantitative and qualitative data are given equal priority. When data are collected concurrently, quantitative and qualitative data are gathered simultaneously, and the implementation is simultaneous. Therefore, quantitative and qualitative data had equal priority in combining and interpreting results. An integrating strategy was utilized for mixing the data, integrating the two databases by merging the quantitative data with the qualitative data (Creswell, 2009).

Population and Sample

The study population comprises 109 secondary school teachers working in 92 state and 17 private schools in Turkey-Ankara. The snowball sampling method was used with 109 teachers who voluntarily participated in the study. The demographics of the participating teachers are displayed in Table 2. Most are female (76%) and public school teachers (84%).

Table 2. Demographics of participating teachers

| Gender | f | % |
|----------------|----|----|
| male | 26 | 24 |
| female | 83 | 76 |
| Type of school | f | % |
| state | 92 | 84 |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|-----|
| private | 17 | 16 |
| Teachers' major | f | % |
| Turkish | 16 | 15 |
| History of the Turkish Revolution | 17 | 16 |
| Religion and ethics | 7 | 6 |
| Foreign language | 24 | 22 |
| Mathematics | 21 | 19 |
| Science | 24 | 22 |
| Total | 109 | 100 |

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through an online survey, which included eight open-ended questions. The first four questions collected quantitative data and were analyzed by quantitative statistics. Answers to the first three questions were analyzed by percentages, whereas answers to the fourth question were analyzed by getting the arithmetic mean of the answers given. For this question, the most critical component was scored as 4 points, the second most crucial component got 3 points, the third most important component was granted 2 points, and the least essential component was scored as 1 point. Then, all scores were calculated (added up), and components were ranked according to their total scores. Questions 5 to 8 were analyzed by the content analysis method. To check the effectiveness of open-ended questions in revealing the teachers' opinions, experts (faculty members) in curriculum and instruction, measurement, and evaluation were consulted. The questionnaire was piloted with five secondary school teachers to determine the suitability and comprehensiveness of the questions before its comprehensive implementation. It was finalized considering the responses received from these teachers.

Permissions for conducting research were granted from the Ankara Provincial Directorate of National Education and the TED University Ethics Committee (no. E-27535802-100-13170). Before the implementation, secondary school teachers working at different secondary schools in Ankara (150 graduates) were e-mailed about the purpose and content of the study, along with the online survey link and the online consent form. Then, they were asked to send the research information, consent forms, and survey link to their colleagues. Then, a total of 109 secondary school teachers willingly filled out the online survey. A pattern-coding method was used where the researcher first determined the themes and appropriate codes were placed into them (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

For the survey, teachers' opinions were analyzed to present the findings. In the following sections, the findings of each survey question are presented separately.

Alignment between the Questions Asked in the LGS Exam and the Knowledge and Skills Presented in the Curriculum

Table 3 shows the teachers' opinions regarding the alignment between exam questions and the curriculum. According to the results, 59% of history, 86% of religion, 88% of foreign languages, and 96% of sciences course teachers believe there is alignment between the questions asked in the LGS exam and the knowledge and skills presented in the curriculum. However, teachers believe the opposite for two courses: Turkish (38%), and mathematics (38%).

Table 3. Opinions of the teachers regarding the alignment between exam questions and the curriculum

| | Aligned | Partially Aligned | Not aligned |
|-----------------------------------|---------|-------------------|-------------|
| Turkish | 6 | 1 | 9 |
| History of the Turkish Revolution | 10 | 3 | 4 |
| Religion and ethics | 6 | - | 1 |
| Foreign language | 21 | 2 | 1 |
| Mathematics | 8 | 1 | 12 |
| Science | 23 | - | 1 |

Alignment between Questions Asked in the LGS Exam and the Compulsory Course Books and Materials

Table 4 shows the teachers' opinions regarding the alignment between exam questions and the course books and materials used.

Table 4. Opinions of the teachers regarding the alignment between exam questions and the course books and materials used

| | Aligned | Partially Aligned | Not aligned |
|-----------------------------------|---------|-------------------|-------------|
| Turkish | 2 | 3 | 11 |
| History of the Turkish Revolution | 11 | 4 | 2 |
| Religion and ethics | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| Foreign language | 14 | 4 | 6 |
| Mathematics | 2 | 2 | 17 |
| Science | 5 | 4 | 15 |

The findings show that 65% of history, 57% of religion, and 58% of foreign language course teachers see a strong alignment between the questions asked in the LGS exam and the compulsory course books and materials used. However, for three courses—Turkish (13%), mathematics (10%), and sciences (21%), teachers believe the opposite, and they find the course books and materials ineffective.

Perceived Usefulness of Sample Exam LGS Questions

Table 5 shows the teachers' opinions regarding the usefulness of sample exam questions released by MoNE.

Table 5. Opinions of the teachers regarding the usefulness of sample exam questions released by MoNE

| | Useful | Partially Useful | Not useful |
|-----------------------------------|--------|------------------|------------|
| Turkish | 14 | 1 | 1 |
| History of the Turkish Revolution | 14 | 2 | 1 |
| Religion and ethics | 6 | - | 1 |
| Foreign language | 17 | 6 | 1 |
| Mathematics | 19 | 2 | - |
| Science | 23 | - | 1 |

The findings illustrate that for all majors, 88% of Turkish, 82% of history, 86% of religion, 71% of foreign languages, 90% of mathematics, and 96% of science teachers found the sample exam questions released by MoNE each month useful for the students.

Importance of Curriculum Components

Table 6 summarizes the importance attached to curriculum components by major.

Table 6. The emphasis given to curriculum components by major

| | The most critical (highest emphasis) | The second most important (second highest emphasis) | The third most important (third highest emphasis) | The least important (least high emphasis) |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Turkish | objectives | content | learning-teaching process | evaluation |
| History of the Turkish Revolution | objectives | content | evaluation | learning-teaching process |
| Religion and ethics | objectives | evaluation | content | learning-teaching process |
| Foreign language | objectives | learning-teaching process | content | evaluation |
| Mathematics | objectives | evaluation | content | learning-teaching process |
| Science | objectives | content | evaluation | learning-teaching process |

According to teacher responses, objectives were regarded as the most critical component of all curricula in all majors. However, while Turkish and foreign language teachers emphasized evaluation as the least essential

component of their courses, for history, religion, mathematics, and science courses, teachers emphasized the learning-teaching process as the least essential component of their courses. It is also important to note that teachers highlighted evaluation as the second-most crucial component they focused on for religion and mathematics courses. In contrast, it was considered the third most important in history and science courses. Further, the learning-teaching process was the second most important for foreign language teachers and the third most important for Turkish teachers.

Tests for Education or Education for Tests?

According to Figure 1, almost all the teachers in all majors (81 out of 94) expressed that education serves predominantly for tests. This is especially obvious for religion, science, Turkish, history, and mathematics majors. All the religion ($n = 7$) and science teachers ($n = 22$) believe education is for tests. One science teacher confessed, "All the education process is there to serve tests. Principles, families, and children focus on topics asked in the exams. The kinds of methods we are employing are not important. Students are unwilling to participate in projects, scientific activities, or field trips and do not even want to read books." Another science teacher warned that students are stressed because of high-stakes testing at schools, saying, "All this system is serving for tests. Individual differences between children are ignored. They are treated as if they all have the same skills and abilities. Families and school personnel are stressed, and children are more stressed." A Turkish teacher finally warned policymakers, saying, "The priority of the Turkish secondary schools seems to be increasing the number of successful students in the LGS exam. We can see examples on certain schools' walls that advertise their successful students in the test. Thus, especially in the 8th grade, schools turn out to be more test-centric."

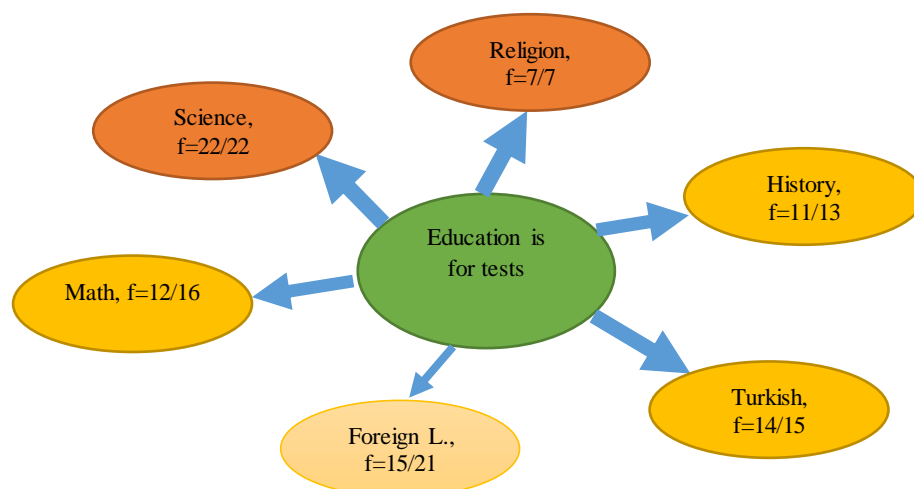


Figure 1. Teachers who believe that the education process is for tests.

Reasons for the Success or Failure of Students in a Course

The findings obtained for this theme are displayed in Figure 2. Many teachers ($f = 29$) in all majors expressed that the pandemic and distance education negatively affected students' LGS exam success, especially in 2020.

As one science teacher remarked, "The decrease in the success level of students in 2020 is related to distance education in the pandemic period. Attendance was unimportant, and students did not turn their cameras on during lessons. Thus, I believe that many students did not follow the courses. Greater flexibility brings failure." Many teachers ($f = 26$) from various majors stressed the lack of congruence between the activities and measurement in the curriculum and the question types asked in the latest LGS exams. This is especially apparent in mathematics and science courses. One science teacher noted, "Question types changed in the exam. There are no longer questions at the knowledge level, but they now require reasoning skills, so higher-order skills are emphasized. Questions are now based on real-life cases and experiments, but the curriculum content and course book activities are still based on knowledge transfer." Many teachers ($f = 19$) from different majors put students' lack of reading comprehension and reasoning skills as reasons for failure in LGS exams. This is quite apparent for Turkish teachers. As one Turkish teacher noted, "We, as a nation, do not like reading and researching, and we only do this to get a better job. When the aim is only to get a job, we come across a generation who cannot interpret what they have read." Other teachers ($f = 10$) stressed the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of their compulsory course books and materials used at schools. Teachers of history, foreign languages, and

mathematics stressed this heavily. A few teachers ($f = 8$) stated that questions' value (coefficient) differs for different majors. Thus, students only prioritize the courses with the maximum value (coefficient) in the LGS exam. Teachers of foreign languages, religion, and history fall into this category.

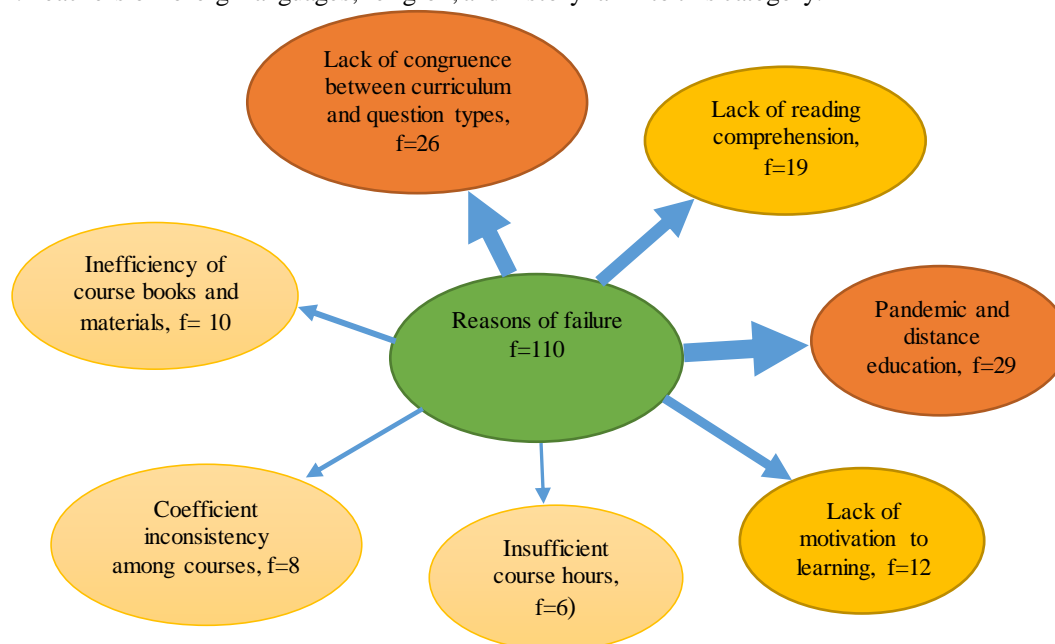


Figure 2. Reasons for failure of students in the last three LGS exams.

Alternative Criteria for the Transition to High Schools

The findings obtained for this theme are displayed in Figure 3.

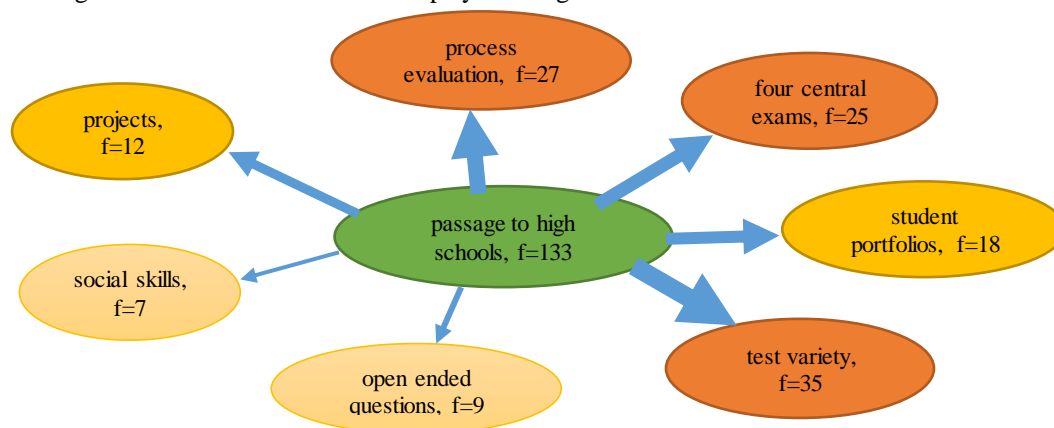


Figure 3. Alternatives to LGS for the transition to high schools.

Most teachers from various majors ($f = 35$) stressed the need for test variety as an alternative to the LGS exam for transitioning to high school. Teachers offered that students should be carefully observed and guided by their teachers from the beginning of secondary school and directed towards the correct type of high school they will best fit into. For this, teachers offered to administer different types of tests for different high schools. For example, one foreign language teacher offered, "The test for the science high schools and the Anatolian high schools should be different. Likewise, there should be skills and aptitude tests for students enrolling in technical high schools." Many teachers ($f = 27$) commented that process evaluation should be more valuable and worthwhile. They offered that student achievement scores from their schools at the end of four years should have a heavier weight on the overall evaluation score. Thus, teachers could be more significant in deciding the performance of their students. As one Turkish teacher offered, "This could be as simple as adding 60% of LGS scores and 40% of accumulated achievement scores that students get within four years in their courses." Some teachers ($f = 18$) offered that students should have portfolios as an alternative or an additional assessment method for transitioning to high school. Other teachers ($f = 12$) offered that students should participate in

projects, which could be used as an alternative or an additional assessment method for the transition to high school.

Impact of Managers and Families on the Success/failure of Students on the LGS Exam

The findings in Figure 4 show that most teachers ($f = 31$) stressed more negative impacts than positives on the effects of families and managers. Regarding negatives, teachers ($f = 21$) put forward the pressure families put on children. One science teacher said, "Because of the country's economic conditions, young people and families are anxious, and the only way to get rid of that is to succeed in high-stakes tests. Families, thus, put pressure on kids, and we do too." A mathematics teacher stressed, "Although a child is interested in other fields such as music or the arts, the family pushes the kid to become a medical doctor or an engineer, which creates pressure on the child to become more successful in LGS. Then, that kid unwillingly starts studying math and science." Another negative impact from families and managers is the pressure put on teachers. Teachers ($f = 10$) complained that they feel pressure, especially from families, to make their kids more successful in the LGS exam. One science teacher commented, "The most important thing is to make students more successful in test s. What matters is the number of our students enrolling in science high schools. The higher our grade point average in the exam, the more successful we are considered."

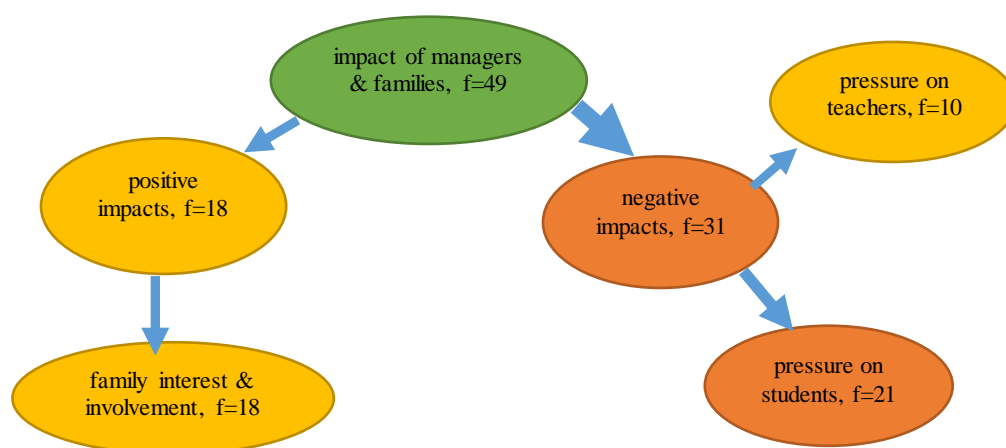


Figure 4. Impact of managers & families on student success

Discussion and Suggestions

A noticeable finding in the study was that almost all the teachers in all majors expressed that education serves primarily for tests. This is especially obvious for religion, science, Turkish, history, and mathematics majors. Caner and Bayhan (2020) criticize high-stakes examination policy change and school conversions in Turkey, stating that the two worked in a mutually reinforcing manner and fed into the neo-liberalization of the education system. This contrasts with Turkey's educational policy documents, which emphasize individual differences, learning styles, and students' multiple intelligences as active rather than passive learners.

This result also supports the findings of So and Kang (2014), whose study in Korea found that students, parents, and high schools become obsessed with test preparation, and this has created a growing private tutoring industry and allowed institutions outside of the school system to provide them, enlarging the education inequality between urban and rural areas. Thus, as the studies above indicate, Turkey should avoid this test-driven paradigm, considering the evidence that the USA's test-driven education system experienced negative consequences on multiple grounds (Wheatley, 2015). However, it is not an easy task to transform the "teach to the test to test what you teach" paradigm quickly, just as Sirotnik (2004) stated that meaningful and long-lasting change only occurs when all the participants in education (social, political, and economic) are committed to and support change. Moreover, keeping up with the agenda stated in educational policy documents for assessment practices is imperative. This is crucial for the sustainability of educational policy implementation. However, the results of this research show that, in contrast to the expectations from the assessments in policy documents, implementations heavily emphasize high-stakes tests.

Teachers in this study believe that the questions asked in the LGS exam and the knowledge and skills presented in the curriculum of their courses are aligned. However, they believe the opposite for two courses: Turkish and mathematics. In addition, while history, religion, and foreign language teachers see an alignment between the

questions asked in the LGS exam and the compulsory course books and materials used, Turkish, mathematics, and science teachers believe the opposite. It is salient that tests should follow and be aligned with what is taught in the curriculum, as curriculum documents reflect the expectations stated in the policy documents. Considering that Turkish and mathematics are the two most essential courses with the highest score value in the LGS exam, it is apparent that the alignment among questions and knowledge or skills presented in their curricula should be analyzed in further studies. As Hamilton (2011) argues, when standards and high-stakes tests are not fully aligned, educators tend to rely more on the tests than on the standards for instructional guidance. Therefore, curricula should be revised for their alignment among the four curriculum dimensions and especially in terms of the philosophy that they adopt. Coşkun (2017), for instance, criticizes the curricula, stating that the number of objectives that go beyond the knowledge level is minimal and that there is not enough explanation about how the objectives will be measured. On the other hand, teachers' responses reveal a call to prepare course books and extra materials, which will suffice for the types of questions and skills asked in the LGS exam. This is apparent in Turkish, mathematics, and science courses.

Almost all the teachers in the study stressed that they found the sample online exam questions released by the MoNE each month beneficial for the students. Thus, releasing these sample questions in the future needs to be expanded by increasing their numbers and qualities.

Regarding the importance of curriculum components, objectives and evaluation were regarded as the most critical components of all curricula. Considering that almost all teachers highlighted objectives and evaluation as the leading components of curricula, it may be said that teachers are objective and evaluation-oriented, which the MoNE centrally determined. More striking is that while Turkish and foreign language teachers emphasized evaluation as the least essential component for history, religion, mathematics, and science courses, teachers emphasized the learning-teaching process as the least important component. This finding is crucial to showing the relationship between the philosophy adopted in educational policy documents and teachers' beliefs in implementing them. As educational policy documents reflect individualized, not one-size-fits-all, learning and as the ultimate goal is to provide a learning environment where students actively participate in the learning process by acquiring capabilities such as independent learning and self-evaluation, teachers are expected to stress the learning-teaching process more than the evaluation component of the curricula. Like educational policy document expectations, the new LGS exam requires students to think critically and analytically while emphasizing reading comprehension and reasoning skills. In contrast, teachers of history, religion, mathematics, and the sciences surprisingly prioritize evaluation and trivialize the learning-teaching process. For this, secondary school teachers of history, religion, mathematics, and the sciences should be offered in-service training focusing on the philosophy and actualizing expectations stated in the education policy documents.

For the reasons for the failure of students over the last three years in the LGS exam, teachers mostly blamed the pandemic and distance education, the lack of congruence between the activities and measurement in the curriculum, the question types asked in the latest LGS exam, as well as the lack of reading comprehension and reasoning skills of students. The sudden distance education process associated with the pandemic may have negatively affected students. Further studies may reveal the learning losses of students during these two years. Echoing Au (2017), who stressed that high-stakes testing in the USA hit lower-income kids more than others, decreasing the opportunity for equality, pandemic, and distance education during this crisis time may also have increased this inequality among poor and wealthy students because of their success at high-stakes tests. The case is similar in Turkey, with diverse student populations in various districts. Thus, as Shohamy (2001) stressed, a new testing system (the new LGS implementations in the Turkish context) should occur only if it positively changes the educational system.

Regarding alternative criteria for the transition to high school, teachers offered that students should be carefully observed and guided by their teachers from the beginning of secondary school and directed towards the correct type of high school they will best fit in. This finding matches the education policy expectations of DP (2019) and VFO (2021). For this, teachers offered to administer different types of tests for different high schools. Many other teachers also suggested that process evaluation should be more valuable and worthwhile. Some salient studies on process evaluation suggest that when students practice self-assessment, they are more effective in improving their writing skills (Cömert & Kutlu, 2018), and electronic portfolio applications improve students' research skills and their attitudes and interests toward research (Polat Demir & Kutlu, 2016). Giving teachers more autonomy to decide about children's future lives will make the teaching profession more valuable and honorable and help teachers focus more on the learning-teaching process than evaluation and objectives. Echoing Berliner (2011), the twenty-first-century economy will require a broad set of skills from the workforce, not a narrow one. Thus, diversity in the knowledge possessed by students ought to be among the goals of national educational systems. As one foreign language teacher said, "When teachers are more autonomous and

do not feel under stress, they will be more fair towards kids. Teachers are the key players in this game, and they are the ones who know their students' strengths and weaknesses, so they can truly direct their students toward the right type of career paths." Other teachers also suggested that student portfolios or projects should be valuable assets in deciding the type of high school students will enroll in. Policymakers could actualize all these teachers' suggestions to better align the commitments stated in educational policy documents with authentic assessment practices.

Regarding the impact of managers and families on the success or failure of students on the LGS exam, teachers commented that families put pressure on their kids to become more successful, creating anxiety for both the students and the teachers. In this case, the pressure directed toward children and teachers will lower both parties' motivation. As Roth et al. (2007) claim, teachers become technicians when pressure comes from the authorities, only transferring knowledge to be asked in tests and leaving aside active teaching methodologies. Thus, as Semerci and Batdi (2015) suggest, providing autonomy-rich environments to teachers who will make fair value judgments is better.

Conclusion

It is important to harmonize educational policies with actual implementations and the reality of schools. Although national policy documents stress individual growth, personal development, and skills, overemphasizing high-stakes tests still dominates the Turkish evaluation system, especially among education levels. Even students of prestigious schools feel the need to go to a particular course to excel at multiple-choice tests before their transit among education levels so that they could get higher scores and be enrolled in a better high school, which then will provide an additional benefit in the transit test to the university level. However, this not only contradicts the expectations of the national policy documents but also goes on to create inequality among poor and wealthy students. In addition, the motto of assessment should be kept in mind: "Test what you teach and how you teach it" while emphasizing tests. Suppose the system turns into "Teach what you test and how you test it," as is the case for high-stakes transit tests. In that case, there is the threat that curricula, course books, and learning-teaching processes will be ignored. Instead, testing will be the single determiner of the education process, contradicting Turkey's education policy documents. As Nichols and Berliner (2007) state, when the young generation puts too much emphasis on external rewards, teachers risk having a young population that does not enjoy learning for its own sake and always expects external stimuli for its own sake.

Limitations

The findings of this study are limited to data gathered from 109 secondary school teachers and their opinions in Ankara, Turkey. Although the data set is large in total, it does not represent the whole population of Turkey. However, the results shed important light on the limitations and negative consequences of high-stakes tests for the transition among education levels and the discrepancy between education policy documents and actual implementations.

Author (s) Contribution Rate

The writer of this article is the sole writer.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval (only for necessary papers)

Permissions for conducting research were granted from the Ankara Provincial Directorate of National Education and TED University Ethics Committee (no: E-27535802-100-13170).

References

- Aslan, G. (2017). Determinants of student successes in transition from basic education to secondary education (TEOG) examination: an analysis related to non-school variables. *Education and Science*, 42(190), 211-236.
- Atilgan, H. (2018). The transition among education levels in Turkey: past-present and a recommended model. *Ege Journal of Education*, 19(1), 1-18.
- Au, W. (2017). *What the resistance to high-stakes testing can teach us about urban classrooms*. In

- between the world and the urban classroom. Edited by George Sirrakos Jr. & Christopher Emdin. Teachers College, Columbia University, Sense Publishers.
- Aydın, (2021). *Dershaneler kapatıldı, kaçak okullar açıldı!* [Dershanes were closed down but illegal schools opened up]. Received from <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/egitim/dershaneler-kapatildi-kacak-okullar-acildi-6518941/> on 3 July 2021.
- Bemoussat, N.D., & Bouyakoub, N. (2019) English language education in Algeria: hostage of an exam-centric education system. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, 10(3).
- Berliner, D. (2011). Rational responses to high stakes testing: the case of curriculum narrowing and the harm that follows. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 41(3), 287–302.
- Caner, H.E., & Bayhan, S. (2020). High-stakes examination policies and transformation of the Turkish Education System. *International Journal of Educational Development* 79.
- Coşkun, Y.D. (2017). *ERG öğretim programları arka plan raporu*. [ERG background curricula report]. ERG Educational Reform Initiative. Received from https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/03/Ogretim_Programlari_Arka_Plan_Raporu.pdf on August 10, 2022.
- Cömert, M., & Kutlu, Ö. (2018). The effect of self-assessment on achievement in writing in English. *Journal of Educational Sciences Research*, 8 (1), 107-118.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Çelik, Z. (2015) *Ortaöğretime ve yükseköğretime geçiş sınavlarının kısacında ortaöğretim sistemi*. [Secondary school system under the pressure of transition to secondary and higher education exams] In, Türkiye'de Eğitim Politikaları [Education Policies in Turkey] (pp.273-298 Edition: 1. Publisher: Nobel& ILEM Publishing, Ed. A.Gümüş.
- DP. (2019). *Eleventh Development Plan, 2019-2023. The decision of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey*. Received from https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Eleventh_Development_Plan_2019-2023.pdf on 15.04.2022.
- Emery, K., & Ohanian, S. (2004). *Why is corporate America bashing our public schools?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Gedikoğlu, T. (2005). Turkish Education System during European Union Membership: problems and solutions. *Mersin University Journal of the Faculty of Education*, 1(1), 66-80.
- Hacker, J. S., & Pierson, P. (2010). *Winner-take-all politics*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Hamilton, L.S. (2011). *Testing what has been taught*. American Educator. Received from <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Hamilton.pdf> on 15 November, 2021.
- Hatipoğlu, Ç. (2016). *The impact of the university entrance exam on EFL education in Turkey: pre-service English language teachers' perspective*. International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional Language, GlobELT 2016, 14-17 April 2016, Antalya, Turkey.
- Jackson, M. (2020). Raising the stakes: inequality and testing in the Russian Education System. *Social Forces* 98(4), 1751–1773.
- Kartal, S. (2013). The points to change by candidate teachers perceptions about our education system. *Uşak University Social Sciences Journal. Special Volume*, 248-262. DOI: 10.12780/UUSBD185
- Kumandaş, H., & Kutlu, Ö. (2010). High stakes testing: does secondary education examination involve any risks? *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 9, 758–764.
- Miles, M, B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: an expanded sourcebook*. (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- MoNE. (2017). *Life sciences curriculum*. Turkish Ministry of Education Publications.
- Musoba, G. (2011). Accountability policies and readiness for college for diverse students. *Educational Policy*, 25(3), 451-487.
- Neyişci, N., Turabik, T., Gün, F., & Kısa, N. (2020). Problems of the Turkish Education System according to the prospective teachers and their possible solutions. *Kastamonu Education Journal*, 28(6), 2257-2270. doi: 10.24106/kefdergi.4095.
- Nichols, S. L., Berliner, D.C. (2007). *Collateral damage: how high-stakes testing corrupts America's schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press
- OECD. (2020). *Education policy outlook, Turkey*. Education Policy Outlook.
- Pham, H. (2021). *Challenges defining a life purpose in an exam-driven culture: a case of Vietnam*. Proceedings of the 17th International Conference of the Asia Association of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (Asia CALL 2021). DOI <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210226.028>
- Polat Demir, B., & Kutlu, Ö. (2016). The effect of electronic portfolio applications on 6th graders' research skills. *Education and Science*, 41 (188), 227-253.
- Roth, G., Assor, A., Kanat-Maymon, Y., Kaplan, H. (2007). Autonomous motivation for teaching: how self-

- determined teaching may lead to self-determined learning. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(4), 761-774.
- Semerci, Ç., & Batdi, V. (2015). A meta-analysis of constructivist learning approach on learners' academic achievements, retention, and attitudes. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 3(2).
- Seta. (2021). *2021 LGS sonuçlarının kısa analizi [Brief analysis of 2021 LGS results]*. Received from <https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2021/07/P312-2021-LGS.pdf> on 20 October, 2022.
- Shohamy, E. (2001). *The power of tests. a critical perspective on the uses of language tests*. London: Longman/Pearson Education.
- Sirotnik, K.A. (2004). *What ought to matter in public education (pp 118–19)*. In Strange, yet Familiar: Assessment-Driven Education. Linda Mabry Editor. Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, and London.
- So, K., & Kang, J. (2014). Curriculum reform in Korea: issues and challenges for the twenty-first century learning. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 23, 795–803.
- Sung, Y., & Kang, M. (2012). The cultural politics of national testing and test result release policy in South Korea: a critical discourse analysis. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 32(1), 53–73.
- Şad, S.N., & Şahiner, Y.K. (2016). Students' teachers' and parents' views about transition from basic education to secondary education (BESE) system. *Elementary Education Online*, 15(1), 53-76.
- TTKB [Board of Education and Discipline]. (2017). *Müfredatta yenileme ve değişiklik çalışmalarımız üzerine. [Upon renewal and changes on curricula]*. Received from http://ttkb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2017_07/18160003_basin_aciklamasi-program.pdf on 15 September, 2022.
- VFO (2021). *Turkey's Education Vision, 2023*. Received from https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ressources/turkey_education_vision_2023.pdf on 15.03.2022.
- Wang, Y. (2020). *Does a test-driven education system fulfill general education expectations? a study on the National College Entrance Exam in China*. M.A Thesis, Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University, Washington D.C.
- Wheatley, K.F. (2015). Factors that perpetuate test-driven, factory-style schooling: implications for policy and practice. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching, and Educational Research*, 10(2), 1-17.
- Xue, H., & Ding, X. (2009). A study on additional instruction for students in cities and towns in China. *Educational Research*, 348, 39-46.