

Comments on the LAS study
Kenan Çayır, Bilgi University

* The LAS study is important to overcome the discrepancy between social/political arena and educational field in Turkey. What I mean by discrepancy is that Turkey has been undergoing major transformation for the last two decades. We have begun to discuss problems of ethnic minorities openly at the political level. The Kurdish question, Alevi minority, Roma people are on the agenda. The recognition of these minorities is a very new phenomenon after a long denial of their existence.

Despite these debates at public and political level, and despite several reforms in education, formal education in Turkey is still maintained with an exclusive nationalist approach. Ethnic, language-related differences receive no mention in textbooks. The history of Kurds, for instance, has still been excluded from the official knowledge. The importance of Turkish as the only legitimate language is underlined almost in every book.

Therefore there is huge discrepancy between what is going on at societal level and educational approaches. And thus Problems regarding ethnic identities, such as bilingual education, are still not addressed in education. The LAS study in this sense is a pioneering one, it sets some standards, and it draws our and officials attention to literacy acquisition in particular, multilingual education in general.

** The problematic and the data of this study, I think, are very rich and extend beyond literacy acquisition. As researchers argue access to written language is a key for the extension of linguistic and social opportunities of participation. Literacy acquisition in other words has to do with, if I employ Bourdieu's terms, social capital and cultural capital of pupils. I think reading the data with the concepts of and cultural social capital might enrich the evaluation of results. Particularly Putnam's concept of bridging capital might be relevant here.

“Putnam makes a distinction between two kinds of social capital: bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding occurs when you are socializing with people who are like you: same age, same race, same religion, and so on. But in order to create peaceful societies in a diverse multi-ethnic country, one needs to have a second kind of social capital: bridging. Bridging is what you do when you make friends with people who are not like you, like supporters of another football team.”

Literacy acquisition might be read as both bonding and bridging social capital.

*** This study, as I said extends beyond literacy acquisition to include debates on language and citizenship and language and integration. I think we need to more critically reflect upon the concept of integration in this study.

Do we talk about the integration of an alien body to an authentic original one? More precisely do we talk about the integration of Turks or Kurds in German case into predefined national wholes? Or do we talk about creating a new sense of, Turkishness or Germanness, including equally non-native pupils?

It is a fact that today in Turkey the increasing visibility of non-Muslim and non-Turkish groups and the demands of immigrants in Germany for their equal citizenship rights challenge the dominant notion of Turkishness and Germanness. It is not anymore possible to teach children “to feel German” and “how to be proud of Turk”. We do not have yet a clear answer but we need to develop a new sense of “We”, new ways of belonging and participation to social and political life.

One important difficulty in creating an equal and pluralistic society and imaginary, is the hierarchies and inequalities between pupils of Turkish descent and German and between Kurds and Turks. There are stereotypic images of Turks in Germany, and Kurds in Turkey by teachers. Education can be a means for reducing these stereotypes and creating peaceful society. Literacy acquisition and multilingual education can provide students with a bridging social capital. (since schools are sites of social contacts by pupils of different origin.)

But both social contact theories and research on bilingual education demonstrate that mere contact and bilingual education is not enough for building a peaceful society. If we want to develop peaceful social relations, we need to make these students feel that they are equal in status (plus authority needs to be objective, they should cooperate etc.)

This is a very challenging process but equal inclusion of Turks and Kurds requires the established borders and meaning of our nationally specific regimes and identities. We need to revise our approaches and textbooks. For instance, various studies in Germany show that Turks are portrayed in a way that they are in Germany because they had to migrate from a poor country. That is true of course. But representing Turkish migrants with their contribution to the welfare of the German economy might be a good way for equal inclusion.