

# Multiple Intelligences Theory in Turkish Education System\*

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**Abstract:** Turkey can be regarded as a cultural bridge between the East and the West. After Turkish Republic was established by Atatürk in 1923, one of the radical revolutions was made in the Turkish Education System. In the past two decades, Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory has been an important instrument of discussions to improve all learners' cognitive, affective, and behavioral development in Turkey. The first studies about the MI theory were made in the mid of 1990s. In this study, the initial efforts of the MI theory in Turkey, the reasons for MI theory attracting attention in Turkey, the problems encountered in the implementation of MI theory, and the impact of MI theory on the recent Turkish education reform are presented.

## A General Glance at Turkey:

Turkey is located like a bridge connecting Asia and Europe in the North hemisphere. A great majority of the land of Turkish Republic takes place in Anatolian peninsula, and the rest takes place in Thrace that has an extension in Balkans peninsula. The country is surrounded on three sides by the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the sea of Marmara, the Aegean sea, and the Bosphorus that ties these two seas. Culturally speaking, Turkey is regarded outside European culture but at the same time in close association with European culture. The modern Turkish culture, the roots of which can be traced back to 5000B.C, has a structure that can be referred to as a synthesis of East and West. After the abolishing of Ottoman Empire, modern Turkish

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Republic was established by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923. Atatürk vitalized some radical revolutions between the years 1924 and 1938 in order for Turkey to reach the level of contemporary civilizations. These revolutions can be subsumed under six main categories such as political, sociological, legal, economic, and educational and cultural fields. Atatürk believed that the educational system of Ottoman Empire could not meet the needs of new Turkish people and that a new educational system similar to the western models would be formed. With this purpose in mind, the enactment of a unified curriculum was made on March 3, 1924. All the schools offering religious education were abolished, and the educational system was reformed and unified under the Ministry of National Education. One of the most important reforms made by Atatürk was the replacement of Arab alphabet with Latin alphabet. Atatürk envisaged that it was only possible to reach the level of contemporary civilizations by realizing those reforms only in a secular context. As a result, Modern Turkish Law and other related laws were made between the years 1924-1937 with the purpose of separating religions and state affairs and establishing a secular legal system. The efforts of educational contemporarization and westernization initiated by Atatürk have been maintained as the policy of National Education of Turkish Republic by all the succeeding rulers. Turkey has made a good many of legal regulations and practical changes to be a part of European Union for nearly half a century. The negotiations for exact membership of the European Union have begun since 3 October 2005. The per capita in Turkey is nearly 6000\$ with its 81 provinces and an approximate number of 70 million citizens. Turkey has 575.000 teachers and 13.5 million primary and secondary education students, which is even more than the populations of many European countries. United Nations, NATO, European Council and Islamic Negotiations Organizations are some of the international organizations of which Turkey is a member.

### **The Period of Recognizing Multiple Intelligences Theory in Turkey**

The studies concerning Multiple Intelligences (MI) Theory in Turkey first appeared in the middle of 1990s. These early studies were primarily Turkish translations of international MI articles. Invited speakers from various countries also held few seminars and workshops to a very limited number of educators and teachers in Turkey. In addition, a few Turkish researchers such as Dr. Selcuk visited and observed the MI implementations in American classrooms, and talked to MI teachers and principals in these schools about the outcomes of MI theory. After this, the

initial efforts of the MI theory in the Turkish educational system began in several private schools in Ankara and Istanbul toward the end of the 1990s. The most well-known schools implementing the MI theory as a framework in Turkey were Istanbul Enka School, Private Gazi Elementary School, and Private Maya School. A vivid example is the Private Gazi Elementary School, which was founded and structured around MI theoretical frameworks by Dr. Selcuk in 1998. In this school, the MI theory served as a framework for teachers to explore their teaching styles and assist them in making decisions about ways to structure teaching and learning experiences regarding students' multiple intelligences. These first practical applications revealed some major problems such as limitations in teachers' theoretical background of MI theory, and their pedagogical and practical knowledge about MI activities; the contradiction between the MI theory and Turkish central assessment system; and the parents' concerns about this new way of teaching in these schools.

Reviews concerning Turkish MI schools as reform created new interest and research teams which resulted in further development of MI initiatives in Turkish education faculties. A variety of elective courses with a range of qualities were introduced in the teacher education programs especially in Ankara and Istanbul during the preceding years with no common name and/or description. In early 2000s, first graduate studies focusing on MI theory in different subject areas such as mathematics and science also started. At around the same time, MI-related research collaborations were constructed by research teams in Turkish education faculties.

### **The Reasons for MI Theory Attracting Attention in Turkey**

The practices of multiple intelligences that have been realized in Turkey since the year 2003 have been presented by various researchers at conferences and lectures at home and abroad (e.g., Akdağ & Demircioğlu, 2004; Kaptan & Korkmaz, 2001; Kaya & Ebenezer, 2003; Tarim et al., 2005). Viewed from this perspective, it can be claimed that MI theory has been greatly favored by Turkish researchers and practitioners. The main reasons for this can be itemized as follows:

- 1-Turkish Education has a quite strict examination system. With a multiple-choice examination which lasts 2 and 3 hours at the end of 8th and 12th grades, the educational futures of the students are determined, and only %10 of them can succeed the test. These exams are held mainly in two headings, that is, mathematical and verbal. Therefore, this

system, in which the interest and ability of the students are never taken into account, is heavily criticized. The parents and teachers are looking for a system in which the interest and the ability of their children are really evaluated. At this point, the MI theory can be a good hope.

2-Especially teachers of English in Turkey have played a great role in the extension of MI theory. As they speak a foreign language, they can easily follow the new developments in teaching approaches. In the second place, the MI theory could be greatly applied due to the efforts of elementary teachers because there are nearly 230.000 elementary teachers and almost all of them have taken training in MI theory.

3-The proportion of private schools in Turkey is nearly %2, and there is a big challenge among these schools. Therefore, the private schools aim at being more advantageous by making several practices. Some of the private schools try to attract potential student parents by emphasizing the motto “We are doing education in the light of multiple intelligences”.

4-Multiple Intelligences theory is considered more international as it is brain-based.

5-The level of in-classroom applicability is considerably high.

Because of the reasons mentioned above, the theory of multiple intelligences has gained the highest attraction that has ever been seen in comparison with other theories. The teachers who do not know even the names of many theories can make some general comments about MI. In this respect, it has been of utmost importance that The Ministry of National Education has held the seminars on MI in their annual In-Service training programs since 2002. At present, MI seminars are being held to the advantage of almost all the teachers at the Ministry of National Education.

### **The Problems Encountered in the Implementation of Multiple Intelligences Theory**

There are some problems about the implementations of MI theory in classrooms. However, a lot of progress has been made as to how to solve them in comparison with the first years in which the theory was recognized. The problems in these first years can be handled in two ways such as the ones that teachers can themselves cope with and the ones derived from our education system. First of all, there is a problem about the fact that the teachers have some false opinions and superficial knowledge about the fundamental principles of MI theory and how the theory was developed. Many teachers thought that Gardner developed the theory after long years of

observation or just sitting at a table without doing any research on human mind and how it functions. The main reason for this is that the teachers have excessively concentrated on how they can apply the theory in classrooms rather than learning the theoretical background of it or the fact that the training they have taken in MI theory is much more practical. Because of the fact that In-Service Training seminars are held in a restricted time period, the number of pages of the Turkish articles is limited (usually 10 pages) in most of the periodicals on education and as the publishing houses worry about money in the publishing process, the crucial parts of the theory have had to be neglected. But the definitions of multiple intelligences, which individuals are strong in what kinds of intelligence, and which instructional activities can be combined with which areas of intelligence have taken more attention. Brief pieces of information prepared with this purpose in mind have been presented in tabular fashion to teachers at various seminars. It is very similar to the Chinese proverb that the teachers are given fish but not trained in how to fish. The low level of most teachers in reading and understanding English prevented them from analyzing the main resources for an individual effort. They could not fully understand the main principles, what Gardner meant by eight criteria when determining a candidate intelligence, how he used those criteria and the different aspects of the theory in comparison with previous theories of intelligence; there is no doubt that there were great problems in the applications of those teachers who tried to apply MI in their classrooms through only recitation or superficial knowledge. For instance, a good many of those teachers could not go beyond their seminar notes, the activities written in their books and could not develop some original activities of their own. In other words, the teachers themselves could not interpret MI theory but only carry over the MI theory of the specialists, who prepared those brief notes, to their own classrooms. These ready-made MI theory activities that were given to teachers made it possible for them to maintain a positive attitude toward it but also caused some misapplications in their classrooms. For instance, although it was aimed that the students would learn a science concept as a result of a bodily-kinesthetic activity in a science lesson based on MI theory, it was observed that the students could only develop their bodily-kinesthetic intelligence at the end of the activity (Kaya & Ebenezer, 2006). The teachers who did not have the necessary level of knowledge could not even put up with the criticisms by the school administrators, parents and their colleagues about the practices of MI theory, they even justified these criticisms and in a way they criticized themselves either. In the first years of practice, the teachers often neglected the fundamental

principles of MI theory. For instance; they used the same MI theory-based lesson plan without considering the individual needs, concerns and demands or the differences in the intelligence profiles of the students in various classrooms. Although some teachers developed pedagogically well-prepared MI theory lesson plans, they had problems in transferring this information into practice, that is, into classrooms. The most important problem for many teachers in the application of the MI teaching activities, which is very different from the ones in the traditional instruction, was that of the problem of discipline. The main reason for this problem might be that no preliminary information was given to the students and parents alike about the theory. This handicap was overcome by abounding Turkish references about MI theory to a great extent. Teachers based their main arguments for the inefficient application of MI activities on the fact that the curriculum was crowded and that the activities were carried out in limited time periods and without accounting for the efficiency factor due to the central evaluation. In the latest reform of education, the problem of curriculum has been partly minimized, but time is necessary to make a radical change in the evaluation system.

### **The Impact of MI Theory on the Turkish Education Reform**

The MI theory gained prime importance in Turkish educational system after Dr. Selcuk became chairman of the Turkish Board of Education in the beginning of 2003. The Turkish Board of Education carried out new education reforms for K-8 classrooms from a Multiple Intelligences perspective between 2003 and 2005. The MI efforts have become one of the most comprehensive reforms carried out in the last 60 years in Turkey. The textbooks were newly constructed and teachers were involved with intensive in-service courses, workshops, and summer institutes throughout the country to prepare for the use of the new program. These courses were all supported via a national TV channel, video recordings, and various publications. This new program was carried out on a pilot scale in some cities of Turkey during the 2004-2005 academic year and was put into general practice in the 2005-2006 academic year for all K-8 classrooms in Turkey (TMNE, 2005). As the result of this education reform, not only teachers and university educators but also students and their parents became more aware of MI theory and its practice in the Turkish educational context. Today, there are many researchers investigating and presenting their studies in national and international conferences, undergraduate and graduate courses, and publications involving the MI theory in Turkey.

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