RATIONALIZATION OF LEARNING: LEARNING JUST TO GET THE JOB, NOT TO GET THE JOB DONE!

Derya Keskin Demirer
Kocaeli University
Turkey

ABSTRACT

Turkey’s competitive labour market, as a result of long-standing socioeconomic issues and insufficient policies to deal with them, leads to excessive exams and private preparatory courses that promise hope for thousands of unemployed graduates as well as students in their final years of higher education. Playing an important role in this picture, education has also become a realm of fierce competition over the last few decades due to the increasing number of students, and the limited availability in preferred schools in secondary education as well as in public universities. Therefore, students at every level of the education system prepare for various entrance exams in order to get into better middle and high schools as well as universities and to have a better chance in the labour market afterwards. There is an immense exam preparation market for all these exams that has been increasing since the 1990s and creating a lot of tension in the national educational system as well as among the families as a result of ever increasing educational expenses without even paying off in many cases. While the economy has been unsuccessful for creating enough jobs for the youth, both graduates and non-graduates, market response has always been quick in creating new preparatory courses, whenever needed, in order to provide “paid hope” for the masses. Desperate university students begin searching again for preparation courses before finishing school and many of them start attending these courses in their final years, hoping to be ready to pass a certain exam as soon as they graduate.

Applying the concept of rationalization that has been put forth by German sociologist and philosopher Max Weber, this paper attempts to show how learning has been forced to be rationalized in various ways in terms of getting a job in Turkey. Already familiar with the education process that is based on standardized multiple choice testing, which is supported by test taking strategies, before entering higher education, college students and graduates are expected to prepare for the labour market by attending more private courses and taking more exams in order to get certain jobs in the rationalized labour market. Exam taking strategies are created for every kind of exam, so learning would mean to master these strategies and not much else. Those who attend the exam preparation courses longer and thus pay more would have a better chance to get higher points and then to get the job they are after. In this way, employment of any person is not based on meritocracy but how high s/he performs in the related entrance exam. In other words, this type of “course learning” does not contribute to any kind of improvement in the course taker’s skills in order to do the job any better but to more inequalities in the labour market as well as in the society.
Based on semi-structured interviews with final-year university students and recent graduates as well as related literature and research, this study claims that this kind of high-efficiency, rationalized learning is harmful for any learning process in general and for learning to get a job in particular. It has a dehumanizing and alienating affect on the learner that detaches her/him from the job, and the others involved in the process.

INTRODUCTION

As a developing country faced with long-standing socioeconomic issues and insufficient policies to deal with them, Turkey’s competitive labour market, leads to a lot of tension among young people and their families in terms of getting a graduate degree and a job. On the other hand, graduate degrees have not been enough to get a job in the last few decades. Newly graduates compete with so many like themselves in the labour market that they are forced to provide more than just a graduate diploma. While the economy has been unsuccessful for creating enough jobs for the youth, both graduates and non-graduates, market response has always been quick in creating new preparatory courses, whenever needed, in order to provide “paid hope” for the masses. Desperate university students begin searching for preparation courses to prepare for certain positions or just for strengthening their position in job searching, before finishing college. Many students start attending these courses in their final years, hoping to be ready to pass a certain exam as soon as they graduate. In fact, this affects the quality of final year classes negatively, with the absence of many students, and the lack of interest in lessons (Keskin Demirer, 2014).

Two major problems arise from these competitive circumstances both in education and in the labour market; while the university education is reduced to get a job, it is not enough to get it. Reduction of higher education to a mere mean to get a job in the eye of the students as well as the society leads to various unexpected or unwanted results in the education system itself and in the society as a whole. It is understandable that, after going through a difficult preparation processes, taking various exams and such, students expect to be provided with the means to get a job in the labour market once they graduate. However, along with high unemployment in general and even higher unemployment rates among the youth, there are not enough jobs available even for the graduates of the best higher educational institutions. In addition, Turkey’s unplanned higher education system creates so many graduates with degrees that have no corresponding jobs in the labour market.

Based on Weber’s rationalization theory ([1904–1905] 2005) this paper aims to show how the values, meanings and traditions of education are forced to be replaced by rational ones through reducing the educational success to various central exam points and simply getting a job afterwards. Already the reason for the existence of outside school education (Keskin, 2012), this rationalization process is based on efficient learning and test-taking strategies aimed at reaching the highest points in the exams taken first for secondary education, then higher education, and finally to get a job after graduation. While all these exams are part of the rationalization process of learning starting with primary education, this paper focuses mainly on the Public Personnel Selection Exam (PPSE) and the courses that prepare for these
exams. These courses are attended in the final year of the college and after graduation; therefore they have a direct relation with employment.

Weber [1904–1905] (2005) opposed rationalization for its creation of “iron cage” in which individual potentials are suppressed and everything is expected to be uniform. In this rationalized type of learning, all students are expected to learn rationalized knowledge in order to pass various exams and finally to get a job. This rationalized learning does not have anything to do with the meanings and ideals of education that have been put forward by educators and philosophers throughout history. Based on depositing the rationalized knowledge into students, who receive, memorize and repeat the knowledge, as explained by Freire with “the ‘banking’ concept of education”, rationalized learning does not leave any room to think critically.

But, in the last analysis, it is the people themselves who are filed away through the lack of creativity, transformation, and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system. For apart from inquiry and apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention, re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, [1970] 2000: 72).

This paper claims that education at every level is expected to be rationalized according to these exams, which bears the danger of losing the original meanings of education that need to be protected. These are the foundations of education that are set by renowned educators and philosophers such as Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Pablo Freire (1970) who were the leading figures in the critical pedagogy movement that opposed the ideological hegemony set by the ruling class. Gramsci claimed that popular education, based on critical thinking not on interests, would be crucial in order to create intellectuals at every level of the society and only then change would be possible for the better in the society.

METHOD

The discussion and findings presented here draw upon two related studies, as well as statistics provided by the Turkish Statistical Institute (Turkstat) and Student Selection and Placement Centre (SSPC). The first of the two studies is based on (focus) group interviews, which were conducted in the spring semester of 2014 at Kocaeli University. Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences (FEAS) were chosen for the Final-Year Study (FYS) because the graduates of this faculty are not provided with job titles like lawyers, doctors and engineers, and often face unemployment, underemployment and hetero-employment once they graduate. In addition, many of these graduates attend courses to prepare for exams in order to apply to certain positions in the public sector. Because the saturation point was reached after conducting interviews with three of the five departments of FEAS, namely Economics, Labour Economics and Industrial Relations, and Political Sciences and Public Administration, interviews with the students of another faculty were added into the study to compare findings. Two departments, Computer Engineering and Geophysics Engineering from the Faculty of Engineering (EF) were chosen for this purpose because of the differences in the professions and the labour market outcomes for their graduates. 60 students have been interviewed in 10
group interviews, consisting of 5 male and 5 female groups. The sample included a nearly equal gender mix, 29 females and 31 males.

The second study is based on individual interviews with graduates of the same faculties and departments who graduated in 2014. These interviews were conducted in the summer of 2015, 12-14 months after the graduation. 24 students were interviewed in the Graduates Study (GS), 14 from FEAS and 10 from EF. Considering the gender factor, female and male interviewees were chosen to be close in number, 13 and 11 respectively.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Rational Learning Vs. Irrational Education!

Both final-year students and graduates find the disconnection between their education and the labour market irrational when it comes to job searching. Therefore, they question the point of getting a higher education degree. In other words they are forced to think in rational terms as opposed to traditional ones such as values and social meaning attached to education in general and higher education in particular.

Nearly all students interviewed in both studies have expressed their concerns about finding a job, and many of them anticipated unemployment for some time, while some foresaw hetero-employment throughout their working lives. Most also emphasized the shortcomings of their university education in finding a job. Negatively affected by the experiences of previous graduates, a final-year male student of economics puts it this way:

I will graduate within two months, and I am pessimistic. My friends who graduated in the last few years have been unemployed for one and a half years. I consider the private sector to work, and anticipate at least a year of unemployment for myself. Meanwhile, I am planning to work at some other short-time jobs, as I did during the university years.

Students’ anxiety seemed to increase as they approached final years, leading them to attend courses that might help in finding jobs and/or preparing for entrance exams in order to apply to certain positions in both public and private sectors. Final year students mainly attend two courses: those who aim to work in the private sector or continue their education in the graduate school attend English courses to improve their language proficiency in order to increase their competitiveness in the labour market as well as in the graduate applications. Those who prefer to work in the public sector attend courses that prepare for the PPSE. Out of 60 students interviewed in the FYS study, nearly half attended various courses aimed at employment while only three of them attended leisure courses in the areas of sports and music.

Course attendance seems to be continued among university graduates who were interviewed in the GS. Those who prefer to work in the public sector, or do not see any employment chances for themselves in the private sector for several reasons, continue to attend courses that prepare for PPSE. Most of the students who were attending these courses were not working at the time of the interviews, thus only
preparing for the exams. Those who are already employed also attended some courses depending on their areas.

Those courses commonly attended by both final year university students and graduates, are organized around two main exams Foreign Language Exam (FLE) and PPSE. Thus the contents, strategies, and tools are aimed to provide course takers with the rationalized knowledge and the tricks to learn and remember them to receive as high points as possible in these exams, since only a limited number of them with the highest points have the chance to be considered for the positions applied. A final-year female student of political science expresses her concern as follow:

I did not expect it (getting a job) to be this hard. We have to be successful at least in two more exams and interviews in order to get a job. You do not anticipate this when you come to university. But we face the reality now.

One of the most important findings of both studies is that Interviewees do not see any correlations between the education they receive and the requirements of the labour market, which leads them to deprecate their university education in various ways. In other words, devaluation of their higher education in the labour market by asking them for extra requirements other than the university diploma creates a lot of tension among the graduates that they question the returns and the meaning of higher education. A final-year female student of political science puts it this way:

I feel like I will be an unemployed person after graduation. I cannot see myself in any guaranteed position for a job. We cannot sleep at night when we think about staying at home and not finding a job even after an acceptable unemployment period. We receive a pretty high level education compared to many people in Turkey, but even this is not enough for finding a job after graduation. We are always asked for more. It could be nice to have more, but what we learn in the university is not the same as what they want from us when we apply for jobs.

Once faced with the labour market realities, graduates realize that higher education is not as rational as it is supposed to be in terms of the labour market. This applies to FEAS majors more than the engineers, as the course contents in most of the FEAS departments are basically social sciences oriented as opposed to the market. When asked how they felt during job interviews and what kind of shortcomings they felt, a graduate of political science expressed his feelings bitterly:

Of course I felt shortcomings. I studied so hard for four years, and I reached academic success in certain areas. But it is humiliating not to receive any returns to these after graduation. I still cannot get out of this mood of humiliation. I was so motivated to go to university, because everybody around me said that that I would be well off once I graduated, but I now realize that there is no difference. So I kind of feel beguiled.
Constrained by the Exams and Courses, Again!

Some graduates do not see any way out other than taking the PPSE in order to get a job, even though they are not very optimistic about the long process of exams and the interviews. In fact, almost all graduates who prepare for these exams admit the high competition and express their distrust in the interview stage, which is commonly believed to be biased. Aiming only at this exam and preparing for it since the graduation, a female graduate of Labour Economics admits that she had to put some effort in persuading herself to go to a course after graduation:

I had a hard time convincing myself about attending a course, thinking ‘I won’t attend another course as somebody who already finished university’. But I enrolled in a course last year, and I will probably do the same this year, since I have not received enough points and not appointed to a position.

Turkey’s education system is a competitive one with central exams at every level for better schools first and then to get into the universities. Therefore, students prepare for various exams and attend courses throughout their primary and secondary education, before entering the university. Every year over one million students attend private tutoring centres (PCTs) which can be easily called rationalized learning centres, since they aim to prepare students for certain exams and thus teach mainly strategies rather than subjects involved. For instance, approximately 1.3 million secondary education students attended these courses in 4,400 PCTs around the country within the 2013-2014 school year (Ministry of National Education, 2015). Informal PTCs and one-to-one tutoring are not included in these numbers. Families spend enormously for this kind of learning even though they enrol their kids in the public schools that are supposed to be free. Ranging from around a thousand dollars to 10 thousand dollars a year, families’ expenses of this kind reach millions of dollars each year. Worn out throughout this process, attending another course or taking another exam would be the last thing any college graduate would like to do. However, many cannot see alternatives to taking exams and thus attending courses. Final-year college students as well as graduates expresses their exhaustion about this unending exam process that spread all over their adolescence years. A Final year student of Political Science complaints about this process as follow:

We followed lessons in the first two years of high school and then began attending courses in the third and fourth years in order to prepare for the university entrance exam. The same thing happened at college, we attended classes in the first two years, and then courses in the third and fourth years. So the courses seem to prepare us for the life, not the university. For example, we did not have classes in economics and accounting, but we are asked about these subjects in PPSE.

PPSE is a central exam set by the Student Selection and Placement Centre in Turkey as the first step in the selection process of the personnel to work in the public institutions. The first exam of this kind was offered in 1999, while the current name was put into use in 2002. 1,330,000 candidates took the first exam in 1999, and only about 19,000 of them have been appointed to public positions with a 1.4% replacement rate. About 15 million people, one third of which consisted of university graduates, have taken this exam within ten years between 2004 and 2013, and only
537,000 have been appointed to public positions with 3.6% placement rate (State Personnel Department, 2015)

The picture is even more pessimistic for the teacher candidates, who are the graduates of education faculties thus depending solely on this exam for an employment chance if they want to be teachers in public schools, which is the case for almost all. 2.7 million teacher candidates have taken PPSE between 2003 and 2014, and only 459 thousand have been appointed as teachers in public schools, with the placement rate of only 17%. While the number of teacher candidates taken the exam in 2015 was 426 thousand only 37 thousand have been appointed as teachers in public schools leaving 92% of the candidates unemployed. The number of available positions is expected to be lower in 2016 leaving 96% of the candidates unemployed and thus waiting for the next exam (MebPersonel, 2015). This has become not only an employment problem among teacher candidates but also a huge social problem in the society, leaving millions of people, teachers and their families, desperately waiting every year for a chance to employment.

PPSE exams are organized according to three main positions in the public sector: A positions are for the graduates from the faculties of Law, Natural Sciences, Literature, Architecture, Engineering and FEAS as well as their third year students. This exam is carried out every year with two tests; while the first one consists of questions that are based on general skill and general culture, the second one measures area knowledge in ten separate tests according to the areas of Economics, State Finance, Business Administration, Accounting, Law, International Relations, Public Administration, Econometrics, Statistics and Labour Economics and Industrial Relations. While general skill questions are based on Turkish comprehension, general reasoning and Mathematics, general culture questions are based on the knowledge related to the subjects such as history, geography, citizenship and law. Once test takers reach certain points in these tests, they can go to the next level to take exams that are carried out by certain public institutions according to the subject area. After passing this stage they would have the chance for an interview to get the job.

B positions are for the graduates of secondary education, two-year college and four-year college who are ready to take positions as a clerk, security or cleaning person, as well as an engineer and a nurse. The questions asked in the PPSE for B positions are organized under two main titles: general skill and general culture according to their level of education. These questions are categorically similar to those asked in the corresponding tests taken for A positions.

**Escape from the Private Sector!**

There are several reasons behind this build-up of desire to work in the public sector that has become attractive after the first half of the 1990s. 1980s, and the beginning of the 1990s had witnessed a tendency among the graduates to work in the private sector, where the pay as well as other benefits were much better as opposed to the public sector. In addition, private sector seemed to provide the newly graduates with more career opportunities and thus the hope for a more comfortable life in the future. However, this positive picture of the private sector began to disappear towards the end of the 1990s. Along with neoliberal politics imposed at every corner of the world,
financial crisis of the 1990s and 2000s changed the employment conditions in the private sector for the worse in various ways. Outsourcing, flexibility, layoffs, benefit cuts, part-time employment, low pays, overtime working without pay have become common practices in the private sector. Left unprotected against the strains of the unregulated labour market, workers at every level, educated and uneducated, skilled and unskilled, as well as new graduates, began to turn towards the public sector for employment opportunities with the promising job security and more humane working conditions.

Meanwhile, preparing for the public sector exams comes with a price that many graduates cannot pay. Some of the interviewees who are already working in the private sector stated that they would have preferred to work in the public sector, but they had to work right after graduation that they used the first chance to be employed in the private sector. Coming from lower class families, these graduates do not have the necessary support to go through the preparation process, which requires attending courses for a long time and also not working to remunerate their effort. Exhausted by the long working hours and demands of the bank he is working at, a Political Science graduate expresses his feelings about the future as follow:

I somewhat knew that things would be hard in the labour market. So, I do not have much hope if I do not enter into the public sector, a public bank or something else. I thought I would study for PPSE while working, but it has been over a year and I could not even start yet. Working at a bank makes me extremely tired that weekends are barely enough to recover let alone study for the exam. Besides, I am not sure if the weekends would be enough to study, since the exams are not easy any more. Even those who receive 85 points are not given the chance for an appointment. For example this year the government announced less than 1000 positions as opposed to hundreds of thousands of FEAS graduates.

Another graduate of FEAS who have been only preparing for PPSE since her graduation almost one-and a half years ago expresses her unease to receive the course fee as well as the pocket money from her parents as a college graduate:

I had a hard time receiving money from my parents, so I wanted to work anywhere in the public sector just to avoid this shame. But my parents told me that I do not need to work, and that I should only concentrate on the exams.

She also emphasizes the accumulation of college graduates in the course that she attends in her hometown. Graduating mostly from various departments of FEAS in different universities and cities around the country, these college graduates return home and attend courses as if they never left, as they remember the courses they attended before leaving home to begin their higher education in some other city.

CONCLUSION

As can bee seen from the experiences of the graduates interviewed, this rationalized process both in learning and in the labour market is class biased in two ways: While students and graduates with enough financial resources and family support can afford the long preparation process for the PPSE, those without these resources
have to enter the labour market as soon as possible, taking whatever position they find in the first place. Meanwhile, even though they receive the necessary points in the exams, graduates with social networks have much better chances to pass the interview stage as opposed to those who do not have the necessary social capital according to the definition of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who claimed that in the last analysis cultural capital in the form of educational qualities and social capital in the form of social networks are transformed into economic capital ([1986] 1997). This can be traced at every level of education, as well as in the labour market, as the two studies have shown.

Although faced many problems partly similar to the FEAS graduates in the labour market, preparing for the PPSE is not common among the engineering graduates for two basic reasons: first there is even less positions available for engineers in the public positions, secondly, their chance of employment in the labour market seems to be higher, perhaps partly because their education as well as their profession are more rationalized types as opposed to the graduates’ of the FEAS.

The governments of the last few decades seem to establish these central exams as a kind of way to organize this ever-increasing demand to work in the public sector. At the same time, they have been increasing the quotas in higher education, not minding the decline in quality, to place more young people in colleges pulling them out of the streets in order to postpone their unemployment and decrease the unemployment rates in general. However, it is obvious that this kind of politics do not create any solution to the actual problems such as unemployment, youth unemployment, the lack of productive investment, unregulated market, and its ever-worsening precarious conditions that push millions of people in job search towards the public sector where the positions are limited. In fact, politics of privatizations in the last few decades had already caused the shrinkage of positions in the public sector, while it did not create much needed increase in the private sector.

These circumstances left increasing number of graduates desperate in job searching. While the realities of the labour market force education to be market driven at every level, either for the benefit of individuals or interest groups reducing education to a mere mean to get a job would lead to important educational and social problems some of which are still to be seen in the future. In this direction, the concept and somewhat the practice of “The Art of Human Education” as put forward by the Swiss pedagogue J.H. Pestalozzi (18th-19th century), might totally disappear and ration might replace the nature along with many humanly values. Every measure at every level of society, educational system and politics is worth to be taken to prevent this from happening.

REFERENCES


