

## Primary Education System in Ottoman Empire

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### Abstract

*The education systems of states reflect their philosophy, policy, and life styles. The first stage of elementary education and teaching in the Ottoman Empire has been called as Sibyan Schools (Sibyan Mektepleri). The education system of Ottomans founded on Sibyan Schools. Sibyan Schools was the first and the last school for many Ottoman citizens. Therefore, the school which shaped a mentality of Ottomans was Sibyan School. Sibyan School, with its philosophy, policy, aims, content, method, teaching staff, administration, evaluation, and including originalities worth exploring, is a unique type of Ottoman School. Quran recitation was compulsory in these schools. Religious matters, learning how to write dealing with basic arithmetics were the major endeavour in these schools.*

**Key Words:** Ottoman Empire, Education System, Sibyan School (Primary School), Madrasa.

### 1. Introduction

According to Lord Paul Ricaut, “education and discipline system of the Turks is one of the main strenghts of the politics, and the most important elements that sustains the empire. In this system, neither wealth nor bribery nor being inherently in a superior class nor flattery is not valid; however, it applies virtue, prudence, diligence and discipline. The sultan himself rises a man by calling these characteristics” (Oruç, 1999). The most direct way to recognize and introduce a civilization is to recognize and promote of its education system by training the society. Because the training has important clues to that civilization’s philosophy, goals, policies, a type of people and how society and state that the civilazation wants to reach. On the other hand, the school is one of the most important aspects of the education system.

This study which is based on detailed document analysis tries to explore and investigate the effects of the primarsy education system of the Ottomans. The Ottoman Empire, surviving more than 600 years, consisted of different ethnic groups and all the ethnic and religious minorities retained their freedom in education and social life (Bilgiç, 2003). The Ottoman history employed a wide range of change and reform, beginning especially from the 18th century until the collapse of the empire (İhsanoğlu, 2004). As Taşkın (2008, cited in Gökçe and Oğuz, 2010, 42) stated the education system of Ottoman state was the continuation and improved version of the Seljuk State. In Ottoman Empire, considered as “a great miracle of the world history” (Grenard, 1970, 39), the foundation of almost all schools is “primary school (Sibyan Mektebi)”. For those who attend this school, it is also an institution where the foundation of personality stems from while it is the last one for most of Ottoman citizens. Sibyan schools whose influence over all the people in Ottoman Empire that we have always seen is worth exploring, and even a mysterious institution (Köprülü, 1981, 175)

Until the 19th century, the Ottoman educational institutions consisted of the madrasahs, which served as the centres of higher education, the Sibyan schools, which were the institutions of elementary education, and the Enderun schools, controlled by the Court to educate administrators and civil servants (Tanilli, 1996). In addition, the Ahi associations, the tekkes and the mosques were also among the vocational (common) educational institutions (Akyüz, 2008).

## Ottoman Education System

### I. Formal Education

- I.I. Primary School
- I.II. Madrasahs
- I.III. Enderun School
- I.IV. Military Educational Institutions

### II. Informal Education

- II. I. Mosques and Prayer rooms
- II. II. Dervish Lodges
- II. III. Ahi Associations
- II. IV. Palace and Libraries
- II. V. Caffees ve Reading Houses

Among the institutions above, Enderun School and Military Educational Institutions were run by the state, but other educational institutions established by charities were carried through "Foundations" (Uzunçarşılı, 1984).

## ***2. Historical Development of the Primary School***

The Ottoman Empire inherited the primary school (Sıbyan Mektebi) system from Seljuk and other Turkish states and other Turkish states (Demirtaş, 2007).

It is clearly seen that education and training institutions formed around temples from the earliest ages, and the intention previously headed towards religious education, then included other sciences as well (Baltacı, 1976). In fact, the origin of the Primary School can be traced back the activity in Hire which had an Christian teacher and in which only literacy was taught in pre-Islamic Arabia (Shalaby, 1954). The first person who taught writing to a portion of people around him, even being a self-employed teacher of writing is a man in Wadi al-Qura (El-Belazuri, 1350). But the educational activity went so slowly that in Islamic year beginning the literacy rate in Quraish people was only 17. However, spread of schools accelerated with determination of the verses and the hadiths of Islam, with the requirement of trade and with severe encouragement of the Islamic Religion adding a room next to each mosque. At first the schools were literacy centers, then they turned into institutions by expanding their contents and including the basic Islamic sciences and the moral values in addition to reading and writing Qur'an (Atay, 1974).

These schools were extremely common in Seljuks, in other Islamic countries and in Ottomans, and called as "Mektep, Küttap, Darü'ttâlim, Darü'lîlim, Muallimhane, Mektephane, Mekteb-i İptidai, Mahalle Mestandingktebi, Sıbyan Mektebi, Taş Mektep..." (Kazıcı, 2004). In each city, district and village in Ottoman Empire the schools, often next to a mosque and adjacent to it, or in a corner of the mosque were in a simple design (Memişoğlu, 2002). Even in some Islamic countries in the Middle East, it is seen that the whole of the mosque was separated into the teaching of Quran literacy not only for children but for adults (Dağ and Öymen, 1974). On the contrary, for this purpose, there is an understanding we encounter that naughty and game age children should be directed to the schools (mektebs), not to the mosques (El Ahvani, 1955).

## ***3. Syllabus of Primary School***

### **3.1. Philosophy of the Primary School**

Main social element in Ottoman territory is Turk. Within the boundaries of Ottoman Empire, the Cypriot Turks, Greeks, Bulgarians, Pomaks, Serbians, Croatians, Montenegrins, Bosnians, Albanians, Hungarians, Poles, Romanis, Armenians, Georgians, Syriacs, Chaldeans, Arabics, Romanians, Persians, Kurdish, Coptic, Ethiopians, Berbers were also available except for the Turks. Any 3 years old child attending to Sıbyan school his brain was not controlled with his own ethnic culture established a common history with the children of these groups, and culture of living together and the idea of being tolerant of each other in his country were thus founded.

This foundation based on the principal of living the life by sharing it with other people, helping each other, showing love and respect to everyone as a Muslim. On the basis of this principal was sake of God.

Islam ordered every Muslim being women and men to learn science. Educated person was more tolerant of others and behaved rationally. Such a behaviour was intended to be conducted in the Primary School.

### **3.2. Aims of the Primary School**

Either the aims of the Primary Schools or its functioning depended on religion. It is realised that the aims of the people who built the schools and assisted with money there were the same with the aim of the students studying there and the people who helped them to be educated. Their aim was for God's sake by way of making contributions to the education and serving it faithfully (Kansu, 1930). The aim could be embodied in acquiring merit in God's sight and in going to heaven.

Functional aims of the Primary School in Ottoman Empire are also in the following;

1. Teaching Turkish and Muslim children to read Quran fluently and to write in Arabic properly.
2. Teaching basics of Islam<sup>1</sup>
3. Teaching the forms of worship in Islam.
4. Teaching the principles of ethics in Islam and Customs
5. Introducing and teaching true Islamic morals
4. Identifying the abilities of the children
5. Preparing the students for Madrasas.

### **3.3. Policy of the Primary School**

An institution's policy means applications in the institution related to "Country, State and People Management" (Kıslalı, 1984). A primary school was generally one and a large room constructed next to a mosque or a prayer room. It was an extremely common educational institution of Ottoman Empire besides its simple structure from Algeria to Crimea and from Yemen to Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.

One of its most significant feature was that children could come here from 3 years old<sup>1</sup>. The child began the school at least 6 years old (Öztuna, 1978). As Dr. Jerry Murphy, an expert on educational policies, Dean of the Faculty of Education at Harvard University, said " education will be the basis for the construction of the future. Education will begin at very early ages. Formal education will include early childhood education process" (Murphy, 2000), the policy of Sibyan school applied centuries ago was thus confirmed.

The fact that a three-year-old Ottoman child holding his brothers' and sisters' hands came and went to school together, and had first social relationship with other children in the same district was one of the unsolved and mysterious functions of the Primary School. It was "coeducation" at the Primary School. However, boys and girls could sit at the same little desks as they could sit separately<sup>2</sup>. The seats of girls and boys were separate even in some schools (Kansu, 1930).

Starting Primary School of a child was a momentous event, and it would be with a ceremony called "Amen Parade of Children". Similar to circumcision and wedding ceremonies, especially wealthy families who allowed which children started to the school cared too much about the ceremony of taking them dressing up with beautiful dresses to the school on a horse or a carriage with prayers and hymns in front of a crowd of their relatives on any day of the year (Rasim, 1927).

The ceremony (Amin Töreni) was sometimes at the school, or according to social and economic circumstances of the families it was sometimes at home or mansion house and gifts were given and meals were eaten there (Ergin, 1977). Not encountered in any other nations' education history, the functions of "Amen Parade" are as follows:

- a. to encourage the parents to send their children to the schools
- b. to encourage the fathers of other children next door to send their children to the school
- c. to encourage the child to start the school
- d. to encourage even growing sisters or brothers and the their neighbours' children to start the school
- e. to provide dignity for the child's family

Students in Primary School were mostly the children of the Empire's poor, traditional and middle-class families (Öztuna, 1930). Moreover, Fatih Sultan Mehmet, at the Waqf (a kind of religious endowments or charity in Islam; "Foundation") of Primary School which he opened, stipulated certain conditions, "only orphan children, if not, children of the poors would be admitted to the schools" (Ergin, 1977). This is an interesting and truly remarkable fact.

The Primary School was a solidarity and cooperation center of the "Ottoman children's" world as well as socializing. Above all in the circumstances of that day, children studied for free in the Primary Schools; besides, food and clothing were supplied and the school often used to be assisted the poor families through their children<sup>3</sup>. The Primary Schools, founded by especially in big cities, sultans and pashas who had rich waqfs, or wealthy families offered the opportunities for the students in the following:

- a. Education in the Primary Schools were free of charge.
- b. Daily allowance (2 akche) was given.
- c. Clothes (fes, shirt, pants, cummerbunds or belts, shoes and hats) were distributed.
- d. Food was given.
- e. A trip was organized once a year (Ergin, 1977).

In addition to these, another good behaviour for the children was a kind of tradition of being paid education expenses of the poor child by his schoolmate's wealthy family (Öztuna, 1930). It was believed and used to do so. This was a good example of helping each other between the families thanks to the Primary School.

Primary School Education based on providing behaviour patterns arising from religious and social principles, and also discipline to the children. Classes met six days of the week and Friday was always holiday. Classes continued until before noon and midafternoon (Ergin, 1977).

### **3.4. Content of the Primary School**

In general, "primary Schools were founded on three aims of getting the children to read Quran, teaching exactly them procedures of performing Namaz (Salah -pray) and what verses and prayers to read during Namaz and practicing a little in writing as well. Writing, just mentioned, was equivalent to calligraphy; hence, teaching writing did not mean putting something down on a paper" (Ergin, 1977). Besides, there were people who strictly claimed that language of instruction in the Primary Schools was Turkish except people who claimed that it was Arabic (Unat, 1964). We believe that we can find examples for both Persian language, one of the three major sources of Ottoman Turkish could also get involved in the content in recent centuries (Ergin, 1977). This situation was supposed to be a followed policy to ensure and to maintain the integrity and unity in the Empire in which many ethnic and religious groups of people lived.

However, "some Primary Schools in the cultural centers were famous for teaching Arabic and Persian languages. Such schools which had a hodja who knew one of these languages very well were in very high demand" (Öztuna, 1930). So it means that classes taught in the Primary Schools depended on the level of his knowledge, in other words, on his career. It may not be mentioned that art was completely neglected in the Primary School. For example, extensive conveniences were provided those with the ability in calligraphy (art of writing) to improve themselves through taking courses from a highly competent writing teacher (Öztuna, 1930).

In most of the primary schools, musical education was given and talented students were especially supported. Hammami-zâde İsmail Dede, the greatest composer and simply called "Dede Efendi", while he was such a primary school student, was involved in a serious musical education at that age attracting with his beautiful voice and music capability. Similarly, there are lots of such examples among famous composers. Hacı Arif Bey, the greatest music composer, was also involved in the musical education "being discovered" in the primary school. In the light of this information, we show that one of the confidential functions of the Primary School is to select and manipulate the abilities. In the Primary Schools, those who were inclined to be a second wife of a man were manipulated to madrasahs, but those who did not have an inclination were manipulated to various occupations and even, to institutions like Yesevîlik, Mevlevîlik, Bektaşîlik, Kadirîlik, Rifailik etc. and to such sects like darülkurra, darülmesevî etc.

In summary, the classes taught in the Primary Schools are as follows (Ali Suavi, 1870; Başgöz, 1995; Kansu, 1930; Öztuna, 1978):

- a) Reading Quran and tecvit (reading style)
- b) Handwriting (Calligraphy)
- c) Namaz (Salah) suras and prayers
- d) Arabic language
- e) Persian language
- f) Basic counting (four operations and arithmetic in maths)
- g) Basics of Islam (ilmihal)

### **3.5. Education Methodology**

In the Primary Schools, boys and girls commonly attended the classes together, but girls and boys separately sat in different desks inside one room. In addition to this, there were schools in which only girls and boys continued their education (Başgöz, 1885; Brunot, 1988; Kansu, 1930). Almost all schools had only one learning style. It was memorising. Letters, verses, suras, prayers, beliefs of Islamic Catechism, rules etc. were memorized in spite of not knowing the meanings of them (Oruç and Kırpık, 2006). Memorizing was achieved through reading from papers or repeating all together in chorus. There was a kind of individualized progress in the Primary Schools. Students who started the schools at different times progressed at different speeds according to their individual abilities and learning abilities -i.e. memorization abilities. Two students who started the school together could finish it at different times due to their different speeds.

Hodja spared different time for each student, listened to their readings and memorizations one by one, and allowed them to pass through another topic or page. Listening to the students one by one would take too much time in crowded schools. In such a case, his one of the best or graduate, skilled students, called as “Caliph (Kalfa) helped the Hodja listening to his friends, training and disciplining. <sup>4</sup>He would be expected to come before the Hodja, done his duties and provided discipline and control in the school. To sum up, all the classes and the subjects in the Primary School Education were taught with memorization and overloaded the child’s brain. The child who closed his eyes would automatically read (such as a machinery) a sura, a prayer, or a rule by heart not knowing the meanings. Reading without any mistakes meant that they learnt the subject, or in other words, it meant that they became successful

### **3.6. Teaching Staff**

Teachers were called by different names such as “Hodja”, “Muallim (male teacher)” or “Muallime”(female teacher)” in the Primary Schools. In the crowded schools there were more than one teacher (Dağ and Öymen, 1974). Caliph (Kalfa), one of the experienced students and who helped the Hodja listening to the other students and providing discipline in the school did not have a mission and an identity (hüviyet). However, there were calligraphy teachers to teach handwritng in some schools (Öztuna, 1978)

During the Republican Era, as it was tried to be made propaganda, the Hodja was not ignorant. He was a wise man and those very wise men were not rare (Akyüz, 2008). They were well-educated and graduated at least one madrassa. Indeed, in Eyüp and Ayasofya (Hagia Sophia) Madrasas during the time of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, other than the usual madrasa program, a different program was proposed for those who were going to be Muallim in the Primary Schools.

According to this, candidates for primary school teachers (muallim);

- a) Arabic language
- b) Sarf and Nahiv (Grammar of Arabic language)
- c) Literature
- d) Logic
- e) Adab-ı Mubahase ve Usul-i Tedris ( Discussion Ethics and Educational Method)
- f) Münakaşalı Akaid ( Controversial Topics)
- g) Riyaziyat (general mathematics) (Ateş, 1994).

Most hodjas also acted as “imam and muezzin” of a nearby mosque at the same time (Kansu, 1930). Maybe, because of that, “hodja was a respected, considerable, high status man with a good salary”. Especially, the salaries of the Hodjas in the schools of Sultan Waqfs were very high. But the primary schools like madrasas were the work of Waqfs (i.e. charity works) without exception and so those who faced with low income in time could afford to give very little money to their Hodjas. That wealthy families of the children in these schools gave something specific to the Hodja in a month was a regular tradition as well. Some families furnished firewood of the school, course materials, school lunch, and sent the Hodja everything for winter (Öztuna, 1978).

### **3.7. Administration and Inspection**

Islamic religion compelled all men and women to have education. Mother and father were responsible for their children’s education when they gained a better understanding and became more aware of the world that surrounded them. Because of this responsibility confirmed with verses and hadiths, many charitable people had schools built, such as others next to almost every mosque, in order to acquire merit in God’s sight and assisted with lots of money in order to ensure the continuity of the schools (Kansu, 1930). Neither the construction nor the administration of the schools was conducted thanks to the state budget, but with the helps and financial aids of the wealthy families.

The financial aid income met either the salary of the Hodja in the school or the expenses of the school, the food and the clothing etc. In Trabzon, the school (Hatuniye Mektebi) built by Dulkadiroğlu Ayşe Hatun, Yavuz Sultan Selim's mother, and she heavily conditioned to be given two meals a day to the children in the “waqf” of the school (Öztuna, 1978). In summary, a primary school did not have only one type. Anyway, the school appeared in such type in accordance with the request of the person who assisted money there. Except various social conditions, some founders even arranged the school curriculum.

The information mentioned above was often true for the schools with wealthy founders in urban centers. In the schools without wealthy founders, the Hodja required the support of the wealthy parents of the children. Not only was there no curriculum unity, but there were also a great number of differences among the salaries of the Hodjas (Öztuna, 1978).

All kinds of pedagogical applications in the Waqf assisted Primary Schools were under control of the Hodjas. If the Waqf had not made any order, the Hodja always decided what was taught, how it was taught, how much it was taught and which methods and assesment and evaluation instruments were also used in the classes. However, some sources indicate that Muftis (religious scholars of the district) and Shaykh al-Islāms (religious scholars of the country) took over the administration and the inspection of the Primary Schools (Kansu, 1930). This was not a kind of inspecting and controlling one by one, but in general this was just reminding the Hodjas of their responsibilities in the schools.

### **3.8. Evaluation of the Success and Discipline**

In the Sibyan Schools, each class, topic, and homework were based on passing through another topic or page coming to the class and reading Quran by themselves from the holy book to their Hodja or to the Caliphs (kalfa) and reading the prayers by heart after having memorized at home or in the school as well. Thus, any pages or prayers and the basics of Islam was not skipped. There was not a standardized class system in the Primary Schools. Each student started school on a different day and progressed at different speeds, so they graduated at different times. This was a basis of individualized education program.

Resources do not refer to a periodic test (evaluation) system at the end of the subject, unit and year in the Primary Schools. It was not possible for the children to fail the class. It is probable to say that there was a slow progress.

Many stories are talked about punishments such as bashing, beating, bastinado, slapping and so on. applied in the schools to settle the students down and discipline them who did not obey the school rules and to encourage those who were progressing slowly (Öztuna, 1978) ; moreover, despite some examples, most of the stories are fantasies made up by people as a result of feeling antipathy to Ottoman Empire (Kansu, 1930). There are such rumours in the history of every institution. However, there is a common belief that parents give a wide authority to the hodja in order to discipline the child by saying that “at your disposal, he/she is yours” (Öztuna, 1978).

#### **4. Conclusion**

As Gökçe (2009) states that political systems try to control educational institutions because of their contributions to the establishment of the political, ideological, cultural and economic effects in societies. The Ottomans followed the same approach over the state. The first school of the Ottoman Empire living 620 years and occupying 14 million km<sup>2</sup> in three different continents was the Sibyan School. It is not possible to think that it does not have any positive or negative roles for the survival of the state. Its role can be drawn from the following aspects:

- a. Children were admitted to the Primary Schools from the age of three.
- b. The education system was co-education.
- c. Food and clothing were supplied and financial aids were given to both the poor families and the children of those for social solidarity in society.
- d. Among the children belonging to ethnic and religious sects and groups, a common history had been established with greeting and intimacy started at the age of 3 before they did not recognize their intellectual values so that the foundations of the social integration could be formed and the culture of the social tolerance could be provided to exist and develop.
- e. "Amen Parade" known as a ceremony of starting school was an unprecedented tradition not seen in the education history of other nations.
- f. With the discovery of the intelligence types of Ottoman children, they were manipulated to the education of handwriting, music and hafızlık (recitating the Q'uran), to the science and even to the appropriate occupations, and to the well-known educational institutions such as darülmescnevi and religious sects by the Primary School
- g. In the Primary School, the child could choose the role of his adult life.
- h. It was a common organisation to be able to consider every child of different religions, languages, colors, and social classes living within the large borders of the Empire.

Even today's world, the features and functions of the Primary School above are luxury, and there are many countries which has still not reached this concept.



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