

CHAPTER II

The Education System in Turkey

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the history of education system in Turkey and the education structure prior to the education reform in 2012. It also identifies the remaining problems in Turkey's education system as well as to introduce the 4+4+4 reform bill.

A. History of Education System in Turkey

It is necessary to describe the history of education in Turkey for it will be useful to analyze the future of its current system. Prior to the establishment of Republic of Turkey as we know today, Turkey was under the rule of the greatest Islamic Empire in world's history, the Ottoman Empire. As it was religion-based nation, the life of its citizens was regulated within the Islamic values, including the education.¹¹

Mathematics and science, considered as secular subjects, were only taught in addition to religious studies. It was far before the World War II the Ottoman became interested in the increasing success of Western nations in gaining prosperity, which was seemingly caused by the teaching

¹¹H. Ünder, *Philosophy of education as an academic discipline in Turkey: The past and present*, *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, B.V. Dordrecht, 2007, p. 105.

of subjects such as science and technology.¹² The first ever significant change in Turkish educational policy was in the 1920s, the era of Ataturk's Republic. Ataturk, who was considered as the Founding Father of modern Turkey, believed in the importance of adopting Western systems and values to become a powerful nation. His attempts to westernize Turkey ranged in many aspects, from the changing of Holy Law to European civil law, the adoption of Gregorian calendar, the elimination of the Sultanate, the conversion from Arabic to Latin alphabet for use, and the prohibition of polygamy.¹³ Education was not an exceptional area to be reformed (secularized and nationalized), as it was an effective tool to build and to develop a nation. Any educational reform at the time was to serve the purpose of achieving success in economy and technology to the same level as Western countries.

The Village Affairs Commission was established in the 1930s to improve the quality of education for Turkish citizens residing in village communities. Two village teacher schools were opened in 1940s to combat the issue of lacking education in village communities. The schools were to train teachers to work and serves in Turkish villages.¹⁴

¹²A. Nergis, 'Foreign language teacher education in Turkey: A historical overview', *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 15, 2011, pp. 181-185.

¹³K. Christensen and D. Levinson, 'Turkey – Education System', *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, vol. 20, 2002, pp. 547-549.

¹⁴S. Athena, 'Reforming Education in Turkey for the 21st Century: A Historical Guide and

There was a widespread influence of German and French education systems during the Republican era that it led to the teaching of both foreign languages as second language in schools. Moreover, many Turkish students were sent to those countries as they were expected to gain the language and academic skills and to bring them back to Turkey, as well as more French and German teachers were hired in Turkey.¹⁵

During World War II, Turkish education was influenced by American educational approach, as Turkey and the U.S. relations were intensified following their alliance. The U.S. Educational Commission and the Turkish Fulbright Commission were founded to support the exchange of ideas and cooperation in education between two countries. The previous French and German languages of instruction were increasingly changed to English.¹⁶

The Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri-TSK*) gained significant control over primary education in 1960.¹⁷ More liberal practices in education were adopted in Turkey in 1983.¹⁸ Primary Education was made compulsory for eight years (previously five years) in 1997, imposed by the military alongside the headscarves ban and other measures, in which Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan agreed. The eight

¹⁵ D. Bozer, *The Birth and Growth of a Department: Department of English Language and Literature*, Hacettepe University Press, Ankara. 1990, p. 157.

¹⁶ Bozer, p. 159.

¹⁷ O. Akinoglu, 'Primary Education Curriculum Reforms in Turkey', *World Applied Sciences Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2008, pp. 195-199.

¹⁸ O. Akinoglu, 'Primary Education Curriculum Reforms in Turkey', *World Applied Sciences Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2008, pp. 195-199.

years compulsory school was meant to prevent students from enrolling in religious schools.¹⁹

Turkey has made significant changes in recent years regarding its national education system, especially that it vies for membership in the European Union (EU). It has since raised education to be even more important subject than before. The EU consideration of Turkey's potential acceptance regarding education involves the availability of pre-primary and primary education, access to education quality for females, and enforcement of laws on mandatory years of educational instruction.²⁰

B. Education Structure in Turkey

B.1. Pre-School

Pre-school education is delivered to children from birth to age five or six. The program was not mandatory, but in 2009-2010 school year all children aged five were required to enroll in thirty two Turkish provinces as a pilot project of Turkish government to examine the effects of mandatory pre-school education. Although the results show highly increasing enrollment, Turkey still ranks low comparing other EU countries.

¹⁹ 'Timeline: A History of Turkish Coups', *Al Jazeera on the Web*, 4 April 2012, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2012/04/20124472814687973.html>>, consulted 6 October 2013.

²⁰W. Quaisser and S. Wood, 'Turkey's EU accession: Political, economic and security considerations', *Interconomics* vol. 30, no. 6, 2004, pp. 295-300.

B.2. Primary Education

The previous primary education structure prior to the 2012 reforms was based on the 1997 law that authorized uninterrupted eight years of compulsory primary school, which then followed by three years of optional secondary school (changed to four years in 2005). After eight year of study, students were rewarded the *İlköğretim Diploması* (Primary Education Diploma) under the old system. The pre-1997 primary education was only five years of compulsory school, and followed by three years of lower secondary school in which students were rewarded the *Ortaokul Bitirme Diploması* (Junior Secondary Completion Diploma).

For primary education, the government provides several types of school aside from general school. Private schools are provided as an alternative to public schools in Turkey, but only accessible to those from children with privileged economic background due to high tuition fee.²¹ Special schools in Turkey are to serve individuals with special needs. Boarding schools are another option of education in Turkey.²²

Combined classroom schools are the other type of educational institution in Turkey, which exist in villages where students from different

²¹E. McGivney, 'Will closing private tutoring centers improve equality?', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 7 December 2013, <<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/will-closing-private-tutoring-centers-improve-equality.aspx?pageID=449&nID=59156&NewsCatID=396>>, consulted 6 March 2014.

grades are placed into one classroom and taught by the instruction of the same teacher.²³ Language becomes an issue when it comes to combined classroom schools. The main language of instruction is Turkish. Many of students attending these schools come from poor socio-economic background that they do not speak Turkish, but Arabic or Kurdish.²⁴

Many primary schools in Turkey employ the dual or multiple-shift system.²⁵ Mobile teaching is also practiced in Turkey for areas with scattered or low populations. Students attending this type of school are transported daily to a central educational facility, which might cause concerns towards the discipline of the students.²⁶

B.3. Secondary Education

Secondary education lasts four years from grades 9-12 under the old and new systems. Before 2005, it only lasted for three years from grades 9-11. Prior to the 2012 reforms, students could enroll in secondary schools after finishing eight years of primary school. The post-2012 system rule secondary education as compulsory, that students to begin secondary

²³ Athena, p. 30

²⁴ N. Aksoy, 'Multigrade schooling in Turkey: An overview', *International Journal of Educational Development*, 2008, pp. 225-228.

²⁵ OECD, *Education Policy Outlook: Turkey*, October 2013, p. 11

²⁶ E. Toprakci, 'The Reality of Primary Schools and Basic Education in Turkey', *E-International Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, p. 11

education after completing four years of primary education and four years of middle school.²⁷

Secondary education is provided in three types of schools: general, technical and vocational high school. Preparatory classes in foreign languages are also available for an additional year in a number of high schools. High school students are given option to learn specialized branches in the second year of their attendance to secondary school. The branches range from natural sciences, social sciences foreign language, literature, and mathematics.²⁸

B.4. Higher Education

Students are eligible to enter institutions of higher learning after obtaining a high school degree and passing the University Student Selection Examination (ÖSYS). The ÖSYS is a standardized examination taken to determine which university programs and institutions of higher learning a student candidate may apply to. Besides its competitiveness, the exam is set to ration the amount of available spaces in university programs. Topics on the ÖSYS include Turkish language, mathematics, biology, physics, chemistry, geography, philosophy, history, and religion and culture and morality knowledge. The increasing number of students taking the ÖSYS for university enrollment shows that education is getting more valued in Turkey and

²⁷N. Clark and A. Mihael, 'Education in Turkey', *World Education Services-World Education News & Reviews (WES-WENR)*, 1 September 2012, <<http://wenr.wes.org/2012/09/wenr-september-2012-education-in-turkey/>>, consulted 3 September 2013.

²⁸Athena, p. 35

becomes an evident of changing social and economic factors in Turkey providing increased access to educational services for Turkish citizens.²⁹

C. Regulatory Structure

The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) is holding responsibility for the administration of pre-tertiary education. The Council for Higher Education(YÖK) is responsible for higher education planning and coordination, which includes the negotiation of university budgets, overall and institutional admission caps, core curriculum guidelines at the undergraduate level, and faculty head appointments. The YÖK itself is a non-partisan and non-governmental national board of trustees. Educational affairs in the provinces are organized by the Directorates of National Education appointed by the Minister, and working under the direction of the provincial governor.³⁰

D. Performance Indicators

Turkey is known for its majority of young population, the youngest among top 20 economies in the world. With 74 million total population, almost one third is people between 15-29 years of age and half of the population is people aged under 28. Unfortunately, the country has been facing major challenges in educating its youth.

²⁹Number of Students Increasing in Turkish Universities', *Today's Zaman*, 8 March 2012, <<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-274611-number-of-international-students-increasing-in-turkish-universities.html>>, consulted 18 February 2014.

³⁰N. Clark and A. Mihael, 'Education in Turkey', *World Education Services-World Education News & Reviews (WES-WENR)*, 1 September 2012, <<http://wenr.wes.org/2012/09/wenr-13-2012>>, consulted 13 September 2012.

Organisation for Economic and Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports in 2010 that only 31 percent of adults aged 25-64 who had the equivalent of high school diploma, while the OECD countries' average is 74 percent. In this case, Turkey scored the lowest rate among OECD countries. People aged under 25 stood out for only 54 percent in OECD average of 84 percent, ranked second lowest among OECD countries.

Turkey's performance in higher education is just a little better with a graduation rate of 23 percent for university-level programs (third lowest among OECD countries) and 19 percent for vocational and professional oriented programs (fifth highest among OECD countries). OECD averages of both are 39 and 11 percent in order. However, rates of graduation from university-level programs have been increasing rapidly in Turkey, from 6 percent in 1995 to 11 percent in 2005, and up to 20 percent in 2008.

In the case of education quality, the performance indication of Turkish schoolchildren are far below the other OECD countries. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a program created by OECD points out the significant lower performance in reading literacy, math and sciences than OECD average. It is concerning even further the fact that the best-performing schools provide significantly higher-quality education, with an average difference in PISA results, between the top 20 percent and bottom 20 percent, of 106 points – higher than the OECD average of 99 points. This

that the school system in Turkey tends to provide higher quality

E. Remaining Problems of Education System in Turkey

- **The Gender Gap.** One of the most visible characteristics of education system in Turkey is its unequal education distribution between men and women. The rate of illiteracy in 2002 has shown 30.4% for women and 10.1% for men within general rural population, while 18.7% for women and 4.5% for men in the urban area.³¹ The issue of gender discrimination also emerged, pointed by the tendency to favor more prestigious social roles and occupations for men and characterize women in domestic and caring roles in schoolbooks.³²
- **Neo-liberal policies, privatization, and income gaps.** An individual's access to schooling and the quality of education received is determined by many factors including age, income, social class, ethnic background and disabilities. Although free education at all levels has been recongized as the responsibility of the state, it seems that children from upper class families have more chances to benefit.
- **Regional disparity.** Marmara, Central Anatolia, and Mediterranean are four western and most socioeconomically developed regions in Turkey. Istanbul in Marmara is the industrial heart of the country and Ankara in Central Anatolia is the country's capital city makes western regions tend to be more urban and densely populated. Black Sea,

³¹KADER. Report of Working Group on the Education of Women and Children, Congress for Finding Solutions for Women's Issues, Istanbul, 2003.

³²F. Gök, 'The History and Development of Turkish Education' in M. Carlson and A. Rabo and F. ...

Eastern Anatolia, and Southeastern Anatolia comprise the least socioeconomically developed regions in the country, being home to the country's largest concentration of Kurds and have more of habitants migrated to urban centers annually.³³ World Bank reported in 2001, "the level of economic development declines from west to east, such that while the west broadly resembles a West European industrial economy, the east is still in many respects akin to a developing economy".³⁴

F. Secularism and Religious Education in Turkey

Most debates surrounding the controversies of the 4+4+4 Reform Law was undeniably about the position of religious education in Turkey and Turkish society. The criticisms are pointed towards the re-opening vocational (religious) imam hatip school and elective courses on religion-based subjects. Religious education has been a sensitive issue in Turkey (and to Turkish citizens) that many members of Turkish society have found the government treatment of religion to be problematic.

The constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides for freedom of belief, worship and the private expression of religious ideas. Turkey is a secular state, according to Article 24 of the Constitution

³³ K. R. McClure, 'Turkey's Eastern Question: Educational Disparities and EU Accession', *The Washington Review of Turkish and Eurasian Affairs*, February 2011, <<http://www.thewashingtonreview.org/articles/turkeys-eastern-question-educational-disparities-and-eu-accession.html>>, consulted 2 February 2014.

³⁴ The World Bank, *Turkey: Secondary Education and Training*, 2001, Washington, DC, David

of Turkey.³⁵ As stated in the Constitution of the country: "*The Turkish State is a Republic*" and "*a democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law ...*" (Article 1-2).³⁶ It generally protect religious freedom, although some constitutional provisions, laws and policies restrict religious freedom. The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds.

The Turkish state coordinates and governs religious matters through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). One of its mandate is to educate the public about religious issues, managed by one its five departments. The constitution establishes compulsory religious and moral instruction in public primary and secondary schools, with content determined by the Ministry of National Education's (MoNE) Department of Religious Instruction.³⁷

Turkey still struggles to find an appropriate balance between religion and state. The Turkish population is predominantly Muslims, but Turkish government and major social instotutions have been secular since the country's establishment as a Republic. Many aspects of Turkish society from education and governance to the organization of daily life were then officially secularized.³⁸

³⁵ Turkey: International Religious Freedom Report, United States Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2007.

³⁶ G. Alasania and N. Gelovani, 'Islam and Religious Education in Turkey', *IBSU Scientific Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1-3.

³⁷ Turkey: International Religious Freedom, U.S. Department of State, 2012.

³⁸ K. ShivELY, *Taming Islam: Studying Religion in Secular Turkey*, pp. 682-686.

Turkey's secularism is more similar to the French *laicite* rather than American version of secularism. Secularism in the United States aims to completely separate state from religion, while *laicite* in Turkey aims to bring religion under state control. Such idea exists to prevent religion falls to the hands of powerful independent clerics elite that can challenge government power. Instead, religion is brought under non-religious state control, so it is no longer a possible threat to the government. Therefore, this interpretation does not suggest religious neutrality in the public sphere. Religion is tightly defined and authorized by a branch of government.³⁹

It seems that neither the state compromises its secularist understanding nor do the people give up easily their religious understanding and life style. In order to produce good citizens and ensure peace in society, a sound and reasonable religious education should be offered the people in both formal and informal ways. In fact, this is one of the basic duties of the state. However, this should not give an excuse for anyone or any group to abuse the religious needs of people. Religious institutions should continue their education and take students according to the needs of the country. More importantly, they should give priority to the

³⁹ K. G. 1. T. in Islam Studies Religion in Secular Turkey, p. 684

quality of students instead of their quantity,—in light of modern developments and needs.⁴⁰

Although secularism in Turkey is often described as incomplete, the government should not deny the people demand on religious needs. Neither nationalism nor modernity could substitute for religion. Religion, either as an expression of individual piety or as an institutional organization, could not be suppressed or ignored. Less central and more flexible educational policy can better accommodate religion within the framework of general education.⁴¹

⁴⁰ M. Koylu, 'Religious Education in Modern Turkey', Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, <<http://www.crvp.org/book/Series02/IIA-18/CH3.htm>>, consulted 29 August 2014.

⁴¹ H. Adanali, 'The Many Dimensions of Religious Instruction in Turkey', *International*