

The Failures of Turkey's Education System

The problems caused by the secular education system within Muslim lands are very similar. Despite this, Turkey's secular education policy has succeeded to become a 'role-model' in the field of education in a number of Muslim countries. Unfortunately however, the failure in Turkey's education policy has been certified through international studies. The implementation of a non-Islamic education system in a country of a Muslim-majority population is the main cause for the failure. Education should not only take place at school, but also at home, in the streets and every field of life. The current education system however, is trapped within the schools due to the secular ideology and its values. This education system, which consistently conflicts with Muslim people's values and aspirations of life, consequently fails to produce a successful education curriculum and an education program to implement it effectively. The main problems generated by these state policies can be summarized under five main headings:

1- Major Indicators of the Failure in Education

Currently 17,588,958 million pupils benefit from formal education, according to formal education statistics of primary and secondary education institutions for the year 2015-2016, published by the Ministry of National Education (MONE) in Turkey. There are 14.5 million students in public schools, around 1.175 million in private schools, and almost 1.875 million studying in open education institutions.

One of the findings that represent the failure of education policies in Turkey are the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. These findings prove Turkey's incapability of generating people who can develop new ideas and contribute to the country's development. Turkey is ranked second from last among 35 OECD countries in maths, science and reading, and among the last third within 72 countries. The ratio of high-performing students was 1.6 percent. This is far from the OECD average of 15.3 percent. In all three areas, 31.2 % of Turkey's students performed at a low level. Meaning, that one out of three students is in the category of lowest scores in PISA 2015.

In addition, although the government boasts of increasing enrolments, drop-outs increased at the same rate. According to data from MoNE, the drop-out rate from formal education in middle schools is 6.17; i.e. almost 350,000 pupils left school last year.

Another indicator for the failure of this education system is the annually increasing level of **brain drain**. The number of students who go abroad for studying doubled every year since 2009. According to AA, almost 90,000 Turkish students spent 1.5 billion Dollars each year for studying abroad. According to the World Bank, Turkey ranks 11th among countries with the highest number of students abroad. A large proportion of university graduates (almost 70%) work in fields other than their educational speciality. According to the Ankara Chamber of Commerce's report titled "Turkey's Brain Expatriates", 3600 medical doctors are in the USA, while only 90 of them returned. The report reveals that 59 of 100 educated persons slips through our fingers; that we are 24th among 32 countries with the highest brain drain; and that we are 11th among countries who send students abroad for studying.

And now the July 15th coup attempt has added to Turkey's economic instability and uncertainty. After the coup attempt, more than 30,000 teachers have been dismissed and almost 17,000 have been suspended.¹ The number of professors, lecturers, academicians and academics dismissed from state universities has reached almost 4,000 and is still increasing. In a country void of quality educators, or full of educators with destructive ideas, brain drain is inevitable.

2- False Investment Policies Incite Problems in Education

¹ 30,351 teachers were dismissed, and 16,688 teachers suspended. One third of them is linked with the PKK. The number of suspended and returned teachers is 6,474; and 311 were returned to duty after dismissal. (According to the MINISTRY of NATIONAL EDUCATION - MONE)

Turkey is ranked second from last amongst OECD countries in allocating resources from national income for education. Turkey allocated 76 billion 345 million Turkish Lira for the MoNE in 2016, which is 3.46% of national income. The OECD average is 6 percent. For the year 2017, 85 billion was expected, however the "The Central Administration Budget Law for 2017" in December, approved by the President, revealed a totally unexpected rise. Thus, the budget for the MoNE was announced to be 120 billion Liras. Not only is this the highest budget allocated for the MoNE so far, it also amounts to 20 % of national income. Still, it remains a matter of debate, if this amount will be sufficient to close the deficits that have been accumulated so far.

Throughout the last years, the budgets were determined through only considering mandatory spending and thus failed to satisfy the increasing needs for schools, classrooms, teachers and other urgent infrastructure problems in the education system and tertiary education. As 80% of the budget allocated to the MoNE is used to cover costs of personnel and social security expenses, and 20 % for the purchase of goods and services and other expenses, only about 8% is left for the use in education, whereby a massive decline is seen in this amount every year. According to TURKSTAT's "Education Expenditures Statistics 2015" the expenditures on education dropped to 5.8 % of GDP over the last year. 74.3% of this was financed by the state. The share from households amounted to 18.7%.

Alongside this, there was a shift in expenditures of private education institutions from tertiary education to secondary education. This means, that private education institutions began to invest more into the compulsory education field. 47.2% of their expenditures in 2015 went into secondary education, while their expenditures for tertiary education amounted to 47.9% in 2014. This indicates that education is privatized, or in other words commercialized more and more. Thus making quality education even more inaccessible for children of poor families in future years.

Currently there is a 78-fold gap in education investments between the poorest and richest in Turkey. 52.3 % (8.990 billion liras) of nationwide expenditures for education were effected by the richest 10 percent (2.182 million families). However, expenditures of the poorest 10% of the population on education remains at 0.7% (115 million liras). In other words, poor families can spend a maximum of 4 liras a month for education. The 10% of the highest income section however are able to spend monthly 343 Liras on average.

The MoNE itself declared that there is a direct relation between poverty and exam results. An average difference of 22 points has been detected in the results between the very rich and very poor at TEOG exams for 2014-2015.

The privatization of education even accelerated with the closing of prep schools in 2014 and promoting policies for private schools. Families, who invested all they had for a better education for their children in the prep schools, are now being directed to private schools. While claiming lack of resources for state schools, the state utilizes its limited resources for the promotion of private schools. Tax incentives and various discounts, incentives for students of private schools, and more, are all financed with the taxes collected from the public. In 2016-2017 alone, 75 thousand students received educational grants for being enrolled in private schools, while the amount of grant is far from covering private school expenses. However, this is limiting quality education to families with higher income. However, parents who want to escape low quality education, overcrowded classrooms, a lack of teachers, and negative and lacking conditions, are forced to refer to private schools.

The unjust, unequal and already low quality education burdens families in abandoned state schools with extra financial costs. In addition to clothes, stationery, nutrition and travel expenditures; they are illegally mulcted with the costs for personnel (mostly subcontracted), aid workers, cleaning, curtains, cupboards, chalk, heating and the like, under various titles. Thus, instead of studying under these circumstances, a large number of children are forced to leave school.

According to a report published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics in 2015, there are 313,000 child workers at the age of primary education and 38,000 at the age of secondary

education in Turkey.² Turkey was highlighted as the most striking example of the report, as children out of school work 45 hours a week, while children who combine work and school, work 15 hours a week on average.

3- Faulty Education Curricula and Inconsistent and Frequently Changing Programs Reduce Quality

One of the most important factors that directly influences the already low quality of education is the frequent changes in curriculum and education programs. The Republic's main objective in education is to infuse its people with secularism as a way of life. As the goal is narrow and constrained, it failed to establish a settled curriculum. Thus, every change in government and political conjuncture caused frequent changes and inconstancy. In the last 20 years, 11 ministers have changed, and 6 during the AKP period alone. In particular, since 2004, curriculum and education programs have been changed repeatedly. The latest change was the transition to the 4+4+4 Education system (The compulsory education of 12 years) which was made in 2012. The main purpose of this change was to re-open the Imam Hatip middle schools, which were closed by the military in 1997. Additionally, compulsory schooling age was lowered to 5 and 1/2 years. Weekly course hours were changed, and elective courses in middle schools and high schools were extended. There were added courses like the Life of Muhammed (saw), Basic Religious Knowledge, Qur'an al-Kareem, Living Languages and Dialects (esp. Arabic in addition to English). These kind of token changes were aimed at raising a so-called "religious generation" who were able to live as Muslims in their personal lives but also embraced the values and system of the secular, democratic Republic.

New topics are added to the curriculum, however there are not enough teachers, books and educational tools to even implement these additions. For example; the MoNE decided to teach handwriting in schools, but there were no teachers and no books to teach it. There are still old generation teachers who can't read the handwriting of their students.

In October 2016, Prime Minister Yildirim announced the introduction of new regulations in curriculum and programs. For almost 3 years now the MoNE works on changing the 5th grade into a transition class for the middle school, where only Turkish and a foreign language is taught. This is already implemented as a project in private schools and some state schools. The other subjects will be integrated to the curriculum of the 4th and 6th grade. Additionally, English, French, German and Arabic will become compulsory elective courses after the second grade. There will be assignments to compensate the lack of teachers in these branches. However, Turkey was not very successful in teaching foreign languages so far, because they are taught without conveying cultural elements of the language. Instead the books are based upon the life and ideas of Atatürk. Alongside this, only few of the teachers had the chance to learn the language in the country, or they only had the chance for a mandatory period of study abroad.

In addition, a switch to a full-time education system was announced recently. Education currently is divided into two shifts - the morning to noon, and the noon to late afternoon shifts - in order to cope with the problem of insufficient number of classrooms and teachers. The full-time education system means a shift to single shift education, meaning that all students will be present at school from 9 am to 4 pm. This radical change might lead to an increase in the deficit of teachers, while the plan is to overcome this deficiency through only 70,000 new appointments throughout a period of 3 years. Furthermore, there is no plan of how to solve the problem of lacking classrooms.

As for the religious curriculum: The religious curriculum conveys the message that Rasulallah (saw) was a tolerant Prophet, and that Islam allows the implementation of democratic practices. For instance, the election of Khalifah Abu Bakr (ra) is presented as the "first" democratic election in Islam. The Majlis ash Shurah is compared to the parliament... But also here, the problem is a lack of appropriate education to implement the curriculum, as the lack of well-equipped teachers and books for the study is existent here too. So teachers are forced to prepare their lessons from one of the books recommended by the Directorate of Religious

² 'Fixing the Broken Promise of Education For All: Findings From the Global Initiative on Out-Of-School Children'

Affairs. Except for a handful of 'role-model' schools and 'role-model' Imam Hatip schools, the teaching staff changes every few weeks or months, sometimes leaving courses without a teacher, which has a direct negative effect on education. However, no matter how often the curriculum or the programs change, the system is one of rote-learning and based upon exams.

4- The Rote-Learning Education and System of Exams

Turkey implements an education system based on learning by heart. Students are equipped with theoretical knowledge rather than being provided with conceptual education. This entraps them in rote-learning, while a lack of laboratories, experiments, visual and auditory tools leads to unsuccessful results. This rote-learning based education system, enhances an intense and repressive exam system, which, instead of being a tool of educational feedback, is rather a tool of elimination, selection and competition. Shortcomings in quality and quantity, and limited job opportunities after education are thus covered up with this system. Thus, frequent changes are made on the style of exams and on how to calculate scores. In this system, teachers are limited to telling children the potential questions and scoring system in an exam, instead of conveying their lecture. The exams are "multiple choice" tests, thus tutoring and homework are also mainly multiple choice tests. Parents pay for countless test booklets and questions banks in order to prepare their children for the exams. There is a change in the examination and scoring system at least every two years. New scoring coefficients are introduced or changed, frequent new high-school entrance exams, university entrance exams and more contribute to curtail the students' success. Between 2003-2013 there were 8 new exam and score systems. In short, instead of equipping students with knowledge, they are programmed to solve as many questions as possible, as fast as possible. So it's only natural, that PISA results defined Turkish students as unable of understanding what they read. This system raises shallow generations who are unable to understand what they read, who are unable to question what they hear, to express themselves, to develop new inventions, and furthermore who even lack curiosity.

5- A Corrupt Education System Produces Ineffective Teachers; Ineffective Teachers Raise Unsuccessful Students

Teaching is a sacred profession especially among the Muslims in Turkey, due to their Islamic values. However economic and political instabilities in Turkey and promotion of the Western lifestyle, has led to a shift in notions among the society. There has developed the perception that an intelligent person can be more than a teacher, and teachers are often not appreciated anymore. Finally, over the years, the entrance scores for university for teachers became ranked lowest and easiest to achieve. The aforementioned corrupt examination system and scoring, selects prospective teachers from among the lowest levels. Teachers however should also be chosen according to their communication skills and ability of conveying knowledge, and not only knowledge and certain skills. Additionally, teacher appointments took place from among graduates, who did not graduate from the faculty of education, or who had no pedagogical formation. For instance, someone who studied biology but could not find a job, became a biology teacher with a single exam. Thus, those who had no hope for another career, got at least the chance to become a teacher and thus a civil servant. Under the current economic climate, a profession with insurance became more important than loving and being suitable for the work of a teacher. However, even those who are eager to become teachers are prevented from being effective due to the restrictions and impositions of the system.

The failure of the teachers and the students is rooted in the failure of the secular system in Turkey. The foundations of the system, its functioning, its puzzled curriculum, its academic calendar, the schools it produces, the exams it implements, and all the other impositions are only reducing quality and effectiveness. This is the corrupt system that wastes our teachers and students.

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

Zehra Malik