

Neoliberal Educational Policies after the 1980s in Turkey

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INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism emerged as an economic model in the 1970s and 1980s, whose advocates supported extensive economic liberalization, free trade, and reductions in government spending over public services to improve the conditions of private sector in the economy. It emerged as an economic philosophy among European liberal scholars in the 1930s, to restore the complications caused by the crisis of overproduction (Ross & Gibson, 2007).

Neoliberal economic policies have created massive social and economic inequalities among individuals and nations. For example, the same combination of growing personal debt and widening wealth gap that preceded the Great Depression underlies today's economy and is generated by declines in wages, savings rates, and the number of workers covered by private pension plans.

One of the areas in which neoliberal economic policies have been prevailing is education (Hill, 2009; Ball, 2012; Mayo, 2012; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Giroux, 2004; Hill & Kumar, 2009; İnal, 2013; Stegar, 2010; McMahon, 2012). Public education is under attack in North America and worldwide due to neoliberal government policies. Education is a key target of the neoliberal project because of market size (e.g., global spending on education is more than \$1 trillion), education's centrality to the economy, and its potential to challenge corporate globalization if education succeeds in producing critical citizens for a democratic society (Ross & Gibson, 2007).

Governments all over the world, including Turkey, have introduced curricular reforms, with legislation which led to the commoditization of public education by transforming 'learning' into 'bits of information' and skills to be taught and tested and marketize education through programs that promote privatization of public education. Neoliberal educational reforms target at opening up the educational services market to profit-making educational

organizations. Thus, educational costs are reduced; for instance, school libraries are closed down, the number of special needs teachers is reduced, class size is increased, and more online learning programs are opened. All these aggravate the burden of teachers (Ross & Gibson, 2007).

External factors have an important role on the formation of institutions in a society. For instance, during the process of expansion of economy, powers outside the country may gradually have a voice in the formation of institutions (Pamuk, 2014). The impact of neoliberal economic policies on education as an institution has intensified in the last decades as a result of the governments' economic policies in line with the trends all over the world.

I argue that one of the consequences of these policies is that they reproduce the already existing unequal distribution of educational opportunities among social classes as well as targeting at creating a generation that favors nationalist-conservatist values, which are the characteristic values of the ruling powers in Turkey. Besides, the education system and all services pertaining to education are turned into a commodity that can be bought and sold. Hence, education as a social service is transformed into a sector that can only be attained by those who own the financial power, which means that it becomes an institution that serves to the interests of a privileged group instead of different social groups in a society.

The following headings will elaborate on the emergence of neoliberal economic policies in 1980s, transition to neoliberal economic policies in Turkey during 1980s and 90s, and its application to the education system in Turkey. Then, education as an institution will be evaluated. Finally, a conclusion will be made summarizing the main points and arguments in the paper.

Neoliberalism as a New Era in Capitalism

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After the Second World War, the world economic system that heavily resided on Keynesian economy started to break apart upon the demise of the American economic power. American Dollar lost its value as reserve currency, the price of petroleum increased dramatically in 1974 and 1978, which caused a huge crisis that had not been experienced before. Stagnation in terms of industrial production occurred in the second half of 1970s across all countries including Turkey. In the second place, inflation had an important role in the crisis: upon the decrease in industrial production, prices considerably increased (Pamuk, 2014; Öniş 2004).

Neoliberal global policies have been used to pursue greedy free-trade agreements and expand Western financial and commercial interests through the heavy-handed policies of the World Bank, The World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund in order to manage and transfer resources and wealth from the poor and less developed nations (periphery) to the richest and most powerful nation-states (centre) and to the wealthy corporate defenders of capitalism (Wallerstein, 1979; Giroux, 2004; Ross & Gibson, 2007).

In this new understanding of economic system, financial investments, market identities, and commercial values take precedence over human needs, public responsibilities, and democratic relations. With its debased belief that profit making is the essence of democracy and its definition of citizenship as an energized plunge into commercialism, neoliberalism eliminates government regulation of market forces, celebrates a competitive individualism, and places the commanding political, cultural, and economic institutions of society in the hands of powerful corporate interests, the privileged, and conservatist groups (Giroux, 2004).

Neoliberalism as an ideology and an economic model showed its effects in late 1970s and early 1980s. According to Öniş and Şenses (2007), external dynamics has played a major role in the policy transformation in Turkey, but domestic factors such as import-substituting model of industrialization (ISI) in the 1960s and 1970s, neoliberalism, political instabilities

and coalition governments from 1971 to 1980, and market based development during 1980s also contributed to major policy shifts.

For the period starting with 1980s, Turgut Özal had an important role in Turkey's transition to a neoliberal development model. After the deep economic crisis during the late 1970s, his long term leadership in 1980s enhanced the credibility of the stabilization-cum-structural adjustment program supported by key institutions such as the OECD, the IMF, and the World Bank. His initiatives helped to speed the liberalization process in Turkish economy in terms of trade and capital account liberalization (Öniş, 2004).

The Rise of Neoliberal Policies in Education: Thatcher's Education Reforms

The relatively progressive period from the 1960s to the mid 1980s embraced more student-centered pedagogies in primary schools. Following this period, the teachers in Britain were threatened by the demands for restoring traditional practices. A sense of crisis was produced to create a moral panic about "low standards", which prepared the ground for blaming the teachers and schools for the so-called crisis in schooling and educational standards. The panic generated by politicians and the right-wing press included fears of economic decline and a social chaos that implied a collapse of moral standards. After a 10 year ideological preparation, Margaret Thatcher had the legitimized ground for introducing her wide-reaching Education-Reform Act, which projected a number of objectives (Wrigley, 2009).

Since it was established in 1995, the World Trade Organization has made numerous free trade agreements, among which the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) included education in its scope. GATS aimed at applying the regulations of free trade in the education sector and commercialization of educational services through a number of negotiations that take place on an international level (Verger & Bonal, 2009).

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Similar reforms have been realized in the United States and many countries all over the world. This new era in educational policies created a new understanding of schooling, one whose primary objective is to prepare students for the state's standardized tests. The policy makers paid more attention to the needs of the market than to the teachers and students. The end result of such reforms is increasing educational inequality (Hursh, 2007).

Neoliberal Educational Policies in Turkey: Reforms in Education System

Government policies on educational reforms have changed parallel to the global trend after 1980s. The state gradually cut on public expenditures to open up more space for global businesses and mobilization of capital, which implied the minimization of the state control over public services (Boratav, 2008; İnal, 2013; Sayılan, no year).

Neoliberal economic policies basically dictated reforms in the education system at two levels: curriculum and expenditures. To start with, new reforms were introduced in order to tailor the curricula and objectives of the educational institutions at all levels, starting from the early 1980s. The agenda of the neoliberal economy was to provide the market economy with qualified but cheap labor force (Sayılan, no year). According to this new agenda, students were defined as inputs of the education system which were equipped with the required skills and capabilities in accordance with the requirements of the market. What is more, they are convinced to excel in their abilities on a personal level and encouraged to compete with each other for maximum efficiency at work in the future. The curriculum in Turkish education system also favored Turkish Islamic ideology, and hence the curriculum was designed so as to include the elements of this thought. Turkish Islamic ideology was enforced by the dominant ruling class in Turkey in 1970s and it was officially put into legislation during the military coup in 12 September, 1980. With this ideology of the state, neoliberalism and globalization gained momentum in Turkey (Copeaux, 1998; Kurt, 2010).

The second set of reforms was related to the funding of public schooling by the state. The neoliberal economy necessitated immediate cut downs on the amount of money spent on public education so that more space could be opened up for corporate businesses and entrepreneurs to tailor the education system according to labor force and skills requirements of the market. However, the education system itself provided a good source of profit because books, buildings, teachers, and all facilities pertaining to education as a whole could be bought and sold.

The public needs such as schooling, health service, and health insurance were to be no more provided by the state but the private entrepreneurs. As a result, the meanings that were attached to the function of education changed. Formerly designed and institutionalized as a mechanism to meet the educational needs of people, education sector was turned into a means of producing individuals whose labor power is cultivated to meet the needs of the private businesses instead of satisfying public needs (Sayılan, no year).

Curricular Reforms

The new curriculum of primary education has been designed as a result of the neoliberal economic policies. With a rather detailed and “contemporary” language and method, it bluntly expresses that human labor is to be improved, varied, and individualized in order to adapt to the globalizing economic conditions of the contemporary world. The new curriculum also deploys the concepts such as “effectiveness”, “productivity”, and “quality” which are frequently used within neoliberalism in Social Studies (*Sosyal Bilgiler*) (İnal, 2013). So, the multilateral development of the individuals is either ignored or not considered to be crucial any more.

Neoliberal economic policies are evident in the 9th Five-Year Development Plan.¹ With the new education system, effective development of human resources, sustainable

¹ The justification inscription can be reached through the link:
<http://pbk.tbmm.gov.tr/dokumanlar/kalkinma-plani-9-genel-kurul.pdf>

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development, improvement of educational institutions to improve the competitiveness in the economy, improvement of competency by decreasing individual and social expenditure on education, participation of local administrations and civil partners to education are among the issues that were considered. Education system is envisaged to be participatory, measurable, and efficient with its individuals bearing certificates and diplomas ready to be evaluated by corporate businesses' human resources department. As can be seen, the concepts frequently used in the planning of education system overlap with the ones in neoliberal ideology and its market economy expectations (Şentürk, 2008).

Reforms on the funding of public education

Neoliberal restructuring in education in Turkey started with the decisions taken on January 24, 1980, and accelerated with structural adjustment and stabilization programs. Cuts in public spending and privatization in education as a public service first started with the campaign "Build your school yourself"². This campaign and similar applications were projected by global actors since 1990s. For example, via World Bank and Ministry of Education partnership, National Education Development Project aimed at restructuring primary education at a local level on the basis of decentralization. In addition, education services, which are currently being delivered by the Ministry of Education are planned to be taken over by the special provincial administrations (*il özel idareleri*). The financing of education is given to these administrations (Timur, 2007). By this way, public education becomes a service that can be bought and sold by private institutions and companies rather than a service provided by the state for free.

Education as an Institution

² Formal documents issued for the campaign can be reached through:
http://mevzuat.meb.gov.tr/html/0003_3.html

Free market has emerged in the 1980s as the major model for organizing all facets of everyday life. In this process, citizenship and studentship have become a function of consumerism, and politics have been reconstructed in a way that they are out of control of the public via deregulations, privatization, and other neoliberal policies/measures (Mayo, 2012; Hill, 2009; Ross & Gibson, 2007; Ball, 2012).

Access to adequate healthcare, housing, employment, public transportation, and education was formerly carried out by social state, but now all of them have been largely privatized. Among all of them, education holds an important place as it is the only institution that could provide equal chances for attaining education in order to survive in better conditions. Those parts of the education sector which have not been privatized yet do not get sufficient funding from the state, and hence, the conditions of such schools are not good enough to meet the needs of the public. Besides its commonly known function as socializing individuals to act in a society, education is an institution that has macro sociological function as producing professions and professionals (Meyer, 1977). However, it also a system of allocation; enabling success for some and failure for others. This aspect of education system has deepened and become more visible with the current neoliberal economic policies.

Conclusion:

Neoliberal economic policies showed their effect all around the world during 1970s and 1980s, and they substantially determined the role and definition of education in relation to its requirements. Neoliberalism is a form of market capitalism which is based on the idea that market should be the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic institutions. The driving conception underlying neoliberalism is to make possible to sell everything or plunder for profit (Giroux, 2004).

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Neoliberal reforms in the Turkish education system have been carried out at two levels: curriculum and funding. The new curriculum introduced after the 80s was directed to educating more liberal individuals who are equipped with competitive abilities that could benefit the new economic system. Secondly, the governments of that period reconstructed the educational system in accordance to Turkish Islamist Synthesis, the ideology of the ruling power in Turkey. The education system also went through a great transformation in terms of its funding sources. Formerly sponsored by the social state, the education system after the 80s was decided to be financed by private sector. These reforms deepened the inequality between different social groups and undermined the possibility of attaining a good quality education by all social classes.

The current education system is far from teaching students for their welfare and happiness (Sayılan, no year). Education as an institution has gone far away from its main objective to treat all individuals equally and provide them equal opportunities for attaining knowledge. The reforms introduced after the 80s caused a dramatic change in this objective of education system. To clarify, more individualistic people are aimed to be schooled. Students are motivated to be entrepreneurs of new businesses in the future. Together with the testing system, they learn how to compete with each other instead of cooperating and collaborating. Such individualistic students are likely to be better at competing further in their careers and more inclined to adapt to the neoliberal economy.

The social state prior to the 80s of Turkey provided a limited but important safety net in terms of educational needs of all social groups, and this opportunity of access to education could serve as a system by which economic progress could be realized. However, the concern of meeting the personal needs of the society left its place to a greedy competition among corporate businesses that aim at maximizing their profits in any possible way. With neoliberal

policies, education as an institution has been turned into a mechanism that produces skilled labor force for the competing global powers.

In this paper, I argued that the education system in Turkey after the 1980s was transformed into an institution that reproduced the already existing unequal distribution of educational opportunities among social classes. This, in turn, determined the kind of education that lower social classes could attain.

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