

# Kurdish language and multicultural education in Turkey - Karol Kaczorowski

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## A brief introduction to multicultural education

Education (including education in mother tongue) is often considered as one of the central aspects forming identity, especially during secondary socialization (Fishman, 2010). It is widely understood as one of the most important means for inter-generational and vertical cultural transmission. Educational opportunities, along with economic advantages, are also often cited as one of most influential pull factors in migration studies (e.g., Todaro, 1969). Easy access to high-quality education also has proven to be a prominent reason for families to move to new neighbourhoods or cities (Barwick, 2014). This chapter aims at examining the problem of the Kurdish language in Turkey in the context of multicultural education in Turkey. It starts with brief information on the concept of multicultural education and arguments for a need for it in Turkey. The second part contains basic information on organization of education in Turkey and the third part analyzes problems with allowing the use of Kurdish language in the educational system in Turkey.

Multicultural education is a concept which emerged in the 1960s and has a connotation as a way of educating that secures equal opportunities for students coming from different cultures to realize their potential. Detailed definitions of the term may vary as some of its advocates point to changes in curriculum allowing voices of minorities and intercultural knowledge, others underline new techniques of teaching and atmosphere in the classroom while the concept is sometimes regarded also as a part of a greater social transformation. General principles of multicultural education remain, however, to a large extent the same among all theorists and scholars education studies. The concept has connotations with: teaching and practicing sensitivity to cultural discrimination and any forms of oppression, being student-centered, engaging with active participation of students, preparing students for living in an increasingly culturally heterogeneous society, and ensuring that teachers have been ready to teach students of different backgrounds (see: Gorski and Covert, 2000). Such a perspective on education does not, however, focus only on a culturally diversified host society, but also

includes, and is sensitive for cultural traits of the societies of origin of minority students<sup>2</sup>. As a result of such an approach, underlined rights for minorities to have education on their own culture, including education concerning mother tongue. Chinaka Samuel Domnwachukwu (2010:1-17) – the author of the introduction to multicultural education – underlines that this type of education treats students as social beings embedded in cultural mosaic. It involves acknowledging and reflecting on one's own cultural identity and respecting cultural identities of others.

From the perspective of social psychology of migration it has been pointed out that bicultural education can lead to better performance of migrant students and their better integration. On the other hand, education with pressure for assimilation can result in negative effects on both performance and psychological adjustment (Phinney et al. 2001:503-504; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990).

An education system can also reproduce and strengthen existing inequalities within the society and legitimize unequal relations between groups and people from different classes. This negative aspect of education was underlined by scholars associated with a critical theory like Michel Foucault (1977, 1980) and Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1991). They argued that schools are among the most influential mediums of cultural reproduction imposed on a society by dominating classes and networks of power. Foucault (1980) observes that state ideology and other networks of power use various disciplinary mechanisms and discourses which are sustained among others through the functioning of the judicial system, education and politics. Scholarly debates on citizenship in Turkey have led to a conclusion that education plays an important role in spreading national ideology of Kemalism (Içduygu, Çolak and Soyarik, 1999).

Many scholars and commentators, throughout the years, have been pointing to the role of public education in imposing state-centric nationalist modernization. After the 1980 coup, tendencies in Turkish education system mirrored general policy of the country, aiming on the one hand, at imposing high level of cohesion of society by promoting nationalist Turkish identity, but, on the other hand, pursuing integration with Western markets and European Communities. Constitution after 1980 military coup, has strictly forbidden broadcasting and publishing in

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<sup>2</sup> Some may point out that Kurds in Turkey are not a minority recognized by law, nor are they a minority in quantitative sense in Turkey's southeast (Northern Kurdistan). They remain however a *minority* in a sociological sense, which has in mind the Turkish political and cultural domination. Remarks on need of a multicultural education in Turkey concern also other ethnic and religious minorities in the country such as Armenians, Laz, Alevis – and most recently – refugees from Syria of different backgrounds.

other languages than Turkish underlining that the latter is a language of the whole population of the country. This meant that citizenship education focusing on homogeneity of a society and perception of external danger was taught next to information on human rights and principles of democracy (see: Çayır and Gürkaynak, 2007:53-55). As a result, classes in public education included an introduction of more universal identity connected with human rights and international law, however, topics of citizenship and nationalism still focused on a single Turkish identity, state-centric modernization and affirmation of militarism. Especially obligatory classes on citizenship and state security (called *Studies in National Security* and led by military officers) were spreading a negative view of Turkey's neighbouring countries (especially Armenia and Greece) and minorities as threats to the country's stability and existence. The obligatory oath-taking in primary schools included swearing allegiance to Turkey, and the vow began with words stating that students are Turks, are righteous and hardworking. The rule of Muslim-democratic – Justice and Development Party, which started after parliamentary elections in 2002, brought changes in the education system aiming at closer integration with European Union and preparation for eventual accession of Turkey to the organization. The sphere of education remains an important part of negotiations and reforms undertaken by the government. Most profound of them, passed in 2005, have introduced new textbooks. In 2012 Kurdish was introduced as an elective class and in 2013 oath-taking, and classes on national security led by military officers were abolished (see: Gur 2016). Changes within in textbooks prepared after the 2005 reform were meant to include education on other groups in Turkey and to reduce appeals to nationalism and militarism. Scholars have, however, pointed out that upon close inspection the textbooks include minority groups with regards to discourse on tolerance but still legitimize unequal relations with them. Analyzes of them pointed to continuation of affirmation of narrowly understood nationalism (see: Çayır, 2009, 2015).

Although there are many critically oriented studies and publications done in Turkey among representatives of higher education<sup>3</sup>, it can be argued that critical thinking should be more stimulated within primary and secondary education. Ali Yildirim (2006) conducted a research on students and teachers perspectives on high school history textbooks proving that there is a need for presentation of knowledge encouraging for deeper understanding. According to the scholar, both teachers and students found the textbooks as concentrated only on

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<sup>3</sup> as exemplified by e.g. *Toplum ve Kuram* journal led by young social scientists or journal *Agos* connected with Armenian minority but focusing on many aspects of contemporary Turkey) and articles cited in this chapter.

transmission of knowledge and lacking incentives stimulating interest in subjects and development of thinking skills.

## Turkish education system and its reforms

Turkish education system consists of primary schools, secondary schools (including general, technical and vocational high schools) and higher education. Primary education lasts eight years, secondary four years, and higher education at least two years. Both primary and secondary education has been obligatory since 2013. Education in high schools and universities that offers foreign language instruction in English, German and French is frequently preceded by preparatory courses lasting a year (MEB, 2015; COHE, 2014). Turkish Ministry of National Education recognizes universities, faculties and colleges, graduate schools, post-secondary schools, conservatories, post-secondary vocational schools, research and application centers as higher education (COHE 2014:7-8). In order to stimulate enrollment in the institutions listed above, The Higher Education Law No. 2547 was passed in 1981, establishing a central examination and the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu – YÖK). In 1984, the same reforms allowed to establish non-public universities by private foundations. The Council of Higher Education consists of distinguished scholars, former rectors and civil servants. YÖK consists of 21 members, 7 are appointed by the President of the Republic of Turkey, 7 by the Council of Ministers, and 7 by the Inter-University Council. The latter consists of two representatives from every university, the rector and a person elected by the institution's senate (COHE, 2014:6-7).

Since reforms in 2010, admission to higher education is based on results of two national standardized exams, Higher Education Examination (*Yükseköğretime Geçiş Sınavı* – YGS) and Undergraduate Placement Examination (*Lisans Yerleştirme Sınavı* – LYS), that are given in April and June, respectively. Admission to universities is carried by the institutions themselves and, it is based on a number of points obtained in these examinations as well as composite scores which usually include average grades obtained at the end of high school and results of interviews. The preparation and conduct of these examinations is supervised by the Student Selection and Placement Center (Turkish acronym ÖSYM) (COHE, 2014:6-7, 18).

Undergraduate studies in Turkey last 4 years and end with a Bachelor's degree, while graduate studies last 2 years and culminate in a Master's Degree. Higher education has been

organized in Turkey since 1999 in accordance with Bologna Process which mandates that it is possible to end higher education after 2 years of undergraduate studies and achieving *Önlisans Diploma*, which is equivalent to Associate's Degree in the United States. Turkey had 176 universities as of fall of 2014, with a total of 5 139 469 students pursuing a higher education in the previous academic year (MEB, 2015, p. 37).

In Istanbul – the biggest metropolis in Turkey – there are 11 public and 47 non-public universities lead by foundations. Istanbul University is the oldest university in Turkey, and it dates back to 1453, the year of the conquest of Constantinople. In fact, since that time The Ottoman Empire supported enrollment in religious schools – madrasah (tur. *medrese*). Madrasah in central Istanbul has been converted into an institution of higher education called *Darülfünun* (which can be translated as "a house of learning"). In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in the framework of Tanzimat reforms of the Empire. This institution was renamed as Istanbul University, after the proclamation of The Republic, as a part of changes in the educational system in 1924. The same reforms officially abolished religious schools (IU, 2006).

## The problem of Kurdish language in the Turkish education system

Turkish is the language of instruction for most educational institutions in Turkey. However, some high-schools and universities use English, French or German as the language of instruction, and approximately 30% of the courses are taught in these languages. Alternatively, education in the Kurdish language was practiced unofficially throughout the years in madrasah schools operating near mosques (GÖÇ-DER 2008). Despite the ban on this practice, it is likely that this instruction in Kurdish maintained principles of Kurdish literary language among the Kurds living in Turkey (Leezenberg, 2014). Education featuring Kurdish as the language of instruction remains problematic in Turkey even though education in the mother tongue is a requirement for multicultural education aiming to remove inter-group tensions. This stance was among findings pointed out by Yeliz Kaya (2015) in his critical analysis of the state of multicultural education in Turkey.

Turkey did not sign European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages which indicates that ethnic minorities must have rights to learn in their first language. Although Turkey has signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it had reservations to the articles 17, 29 and 30 that ensure that children from minority or indigenous families have rights to education

and preservation of their cultural identity (Koivunen, 2002:117). Pressure on using the Kurdish language and keeping Turkish as a unique language of education led to very high levels of illiteracy in Kurdish inhabited regions of Turkey. Children who do not know Turkish are not taught the dominating language but are expected to know it and use perfectly, even if both teachers and pupils are Kurdish (Koivunen 2002:18-20).

Despite banning Kurdish in formal education and public life, Kurmanci and Zazaki dialects survived in private relations connected with homes and villages and continued to be taught in the underground (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012; Hassanpour, 2000; Koivunen, 2012:114-117). The situation has improved since the beginning of the 1990s when Article no. 2932 of 1983 preventing Kurdish cultural organizations and publishing in Kurdish was lifted. Use of Kurdish broadcast, education and politics remained forbidden. Until 2013, usage of letters present in Hawar Kurmanci alphabet, but absent in the Turkish language, "w", "q" and "x," was also banned (Geerdink, 2014). Writing these letters and using the Kurdish language publicly still sparks controversy. Many respondents described situations when they were treated negatively because of using Kurdish dialects or having a Kurdish name. Almost all respondents still feel the negative atmosphere when they speak Kurdish in public places with the Turkish majority.

The democratizing reforms introduced by the government of Turkey and led since 2002 by Justice and Development Party resulted in significant changes concerning Kurdish education and cultural expression in Turkey. In 2003 the law was passed on "Teaching in Different Languages and Dialects Traditionally Used by Turkish Citizens in their Daily Lives." This enabled private education of the Kurdish language, but only for adults in a limited amount of time per week and with the requirement of acquiring approval and a diploma from the state (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012:115-116). Since 2004 certain media (including public TV channels – TRT) were allowed to broadcast programs in Kurdish and in 2009, TRT 6 – the first fully Kurdish channel – began broadcasting. In 2010 government approved the program for teaching instructors of the Kurdish language on public Artuklu University in Mardin. That task was delegated to newly established Institute of Living Languages which was organized to conduct research, education, and translation also in Arabic and Syriac languages. The title received achieved after graduation, however, was an Instructor of living languages rather than an Instructor of Kurdish but Instructor. In later years, other universities such as in Muş, Diyarbakır and Bingöl began conducting Kurdish language courses. Since 2012-2013 academic year, schools started to offer Kurdish as an elective class for students starting from the fourth grade

(11 years old). Democratization package passed by the government in March 2014 also included the law allowing private schools to teach in Kurdish.

At the beginning of the academic year in September the same year, three private primary schools in Diyarbakır, Cizre (Şırnak province) and Yüksekova (Hakkari province) planned to start teaching exclusively in Kurdish (though still including Turkish language classes). Kurdi Der and Eğitim Sen – institutions with experience in teaching the Kurdish language – took the schools under patronage and prepared schoolbooks for them. Being an independent organization which did not apply for acceptance as official non-public educational institution the schools were successively closed by Turkish authorities. Officials of the school in Diyarbakır claimed that applying for such permission would mean that as a private institution they would have to ask their students for fees while they believe that education in mother tongue is a basic right (Geerdink, 2014). It is also probable that these schools wanted to remain independent of the government influence, especially because the organization of classes and administration of the school were planned to emphasize egalitarianism in accordance with the leftist program of Democratic Confederalism proclaimed by Öcalan under the influence of Murray Bookchin. At the beginning of the academic year the police prevented access to the building and intervened using teargas and batons. Representatives of schools and the pro-Kurdish party (HDP) demanded explanation from the authorities as to why education in mother tongue was targeted as an terrorist activity (Fitzherbert, 2015; Geerdink, 2014). This event echoed among the Kurdish community in Turkey including Istanbul, and many of my respondents pointed how the state obstructed Kurdish education and violated rights to cultivate Kurdish identity.

Despite reforms symbolic in the history of Turkey, many Kurds and commentators have emphasized lack of fulfillment in practice of achieved provisions for the Kurdish language and continuation of legal persecution of its users (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2012:113-120). This tendency was exemplified in numerous judicial litigations conducted against people and organizations using Kurdish in public, including Kurdish politicians elected to local governments (such as Diyarbakır's mayor Osman Baydemir). Problems and orders for closure also were aimed at media such as the *Azadiya Welat* (in Kurdish "Free Country") led in Kurdish. State interventions against Kurdish cultural and educational organizations have drastically intensified since July 2015 when the war on terror was proclaimed. Between 2015-2016 academics who signed the petition against the use of excess force during Turkish military interventions in the country's southeast also have been targeted by trials and expulsion. These events only strengthen the arguments for a need

of multicultural education in Turkey. New attempts in preparing reformed curriculum with regards to Syrian refugees entering education in Turkey can prompt such a change which would include minority groups such as Syrian Arabs and Christians, Kurds, Armenians, Laz and Alevis<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Need for such education programs, sensitive for other cultures and preparing teachers for people of different background have been stressed by various Turkish scholars in social and education studies taking part in Turkish Migration Conference organized in Vienna in July 2016.



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