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The State of Citizenship Education in Turkey: Past and Present

Abstract

Citizenship education in Turkey has been a part of the state-centric modernization project involving the transformation of public and private lives of Turkish citizens. Although there has always been a separate course on civics, citizenship education emerges as a cross-curricular theme in the Turkish educational system which aims at creating a self-sacrificing and patriotic citizen. Besides its particularistic content, however, Turkish citizenship education also involves references to a universal conception of citizenship in line with Turkey's aspiration to be a member of the European Union. This paper presents a historical frame and breaking points for citizenship education in Turkey from its foundation to the present. It critically examines paradoxical content of the current citizenship and human rights education curriculum.

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Keywords

Citizenship education, Turkish education, Turkish modernization.

Introduction

The special thing about the formal education system in Turkey is that—whereas programs of citizenship have newly been introduced into the curricula in several countries in Europe, partly to counteract increasing disinterest in political process (Osler and Starkey 2001)—it has included a separate course on citizenship throughout its history. From the start, citizenship education was conceived to be part of the state-centric modernization project which would transform (and reform) the public and private lives of citizens in order to create an organic Turkish society out of the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire (stel 2005; Kahraman 2005). Framed with a strong state tradition, not only citizenship education but also the whole formal education system in Turkey is and has always been very centralized (Sakaođlu 1999). The nation state has and always had a strong say and an active role in what is taught and how it is taught all over the country. Thus, it is through the socialization process where formal education plays a massive role that the children of the country are (a) taught the roles they need to play as citizens, and (b) expected to gain the “correct” consciousness thereby becoming modern and civilized people.

The Turkish modernization project involves two uneasy aims: to create a distinct Turkish identity and culture, yet to aspire to be part of the civilized Western world

(Kadıoğlu 2005). In other words, Turkey has never closed its eyes to universal standards, while at the same time aiming at creating a discrete Turkish identity. The history of citizenship education in Turkey parallels this paradox of the history of modernization from the nation formation period to the present time.

This paper explores the main fault lines of the programs of citizenship education courses since the foundation of the republic in 1923.¹ It, then, focuses on current citizenship education and some other textbooks such as Geography and Studies in National Security. We argue that citizenship education is a cross-curricular theme since all national curricula and the contents of all courses are designed to create patriotic and responsible citizens. As we will illustrate, the Turkish educational system involves many courses with textbooks referring, beyond their disciplinary boundaries, to specific citizenship themes. The main argument of the paper is that in addition to partial references to a universal conception of citizenship, Turkish citizenship education is imbued with parochial, duty-based, nationalistic and militaristic precepts.

Citizenship Themes in Education in the Single Party Period of 1923-1950

Following the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, The Code for the Unification of Teaching (1924) abolished all forms of religious formal teaching (the *Medreses* were abolished) and required that all schools be administered by the Ministry of Education (Akyüz 1982; Sakaoğlu 2003; Gök 1998; Çağlar 1999).² In 1926 the new primary school program stated its objective as “raising good citizens”, the 1929 program as “raising people, physically and psychologically fit to be Turkish citizens”, the 1936 program as “raising republican, statist, secular, revolutionary citizens” (Üstel 2005; Çağlar 1999; Binbaşıoğlu 1999).

One should bear in mind that these are the nation-state building years for Turkey after a lengthy and victorious War of Independence. “Melting your own self in the pot of the Turkish self” was valued (Caymaz 2007). The question of who can be considered a good citizen was answered in the following way in the educational records of 1933: “A person, who knows his country well, loves his country and freedom, is respectful of rights and justice, is obedient to his country’s laws, is ready to sacrifice himself for his family and for his country” (Sakaoğlu 2003).

Education was said to be secularized, nationalized and democratized, and it was placed utmost importance upon it. Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, was called the “principal”, and was at the blackboard with chalk in his hands, personally taking a role in education and being proud of it. In fact, Atatürk in 1929-30 dictated the content of a textbook called *Civic Knowledge for the Citizen* to his adopted daughter Afet İnan, who was a history professor (Çağlar 1999). The chapter headings of the said book, in sequence, are: The People, The State, Sovereignty, the Republic, the Constitution, Movements Threatening Democracy, the State’s Duties to the Citizen, Freedom (Public Opinion, Newspapers etc.), Right to Peaceful Assembly and Association, Right to Education, Right to Place a Complaint, Personal Rights-Political Rights, Division of Labor and Work, Tolerance, Solidarity, the Citizen’s Duties to the State. This book was used as a textbook in civics courses starting with the 1930-31 school year (Akyüz 1982; Işın and İşyar 1999; Üstel 2005; Caymaz 2007).

¹ In this paper we are solely concerned with the formal education system and institutions. Therefore, the quite impressive role several NGOs have played and are still playing in the sphere of citizenship education in Turkey, is altogether left out. For examples of these, the interested reader is referred to Gürkaynak et al. 1998a, 1998b, 2002; Gürkaynak 2003 and 2006.

² Around the same time, John Dewey came to Turkey accepting the invitation by the Turkish government; he wrote an extensive report on the basis of his observations (Akyüz 1982; Topses 1999). He was quite an influence on the educational system at that time.

In 1939, the first of the General Assemblies on Education—that are still taking place every few years—convened. One of its recommendations was that a humanistic approach in education should be adopted (Ünal, Özsoy 1999; Sakaoğlu 2003). It was during these years that coeducation started and great emphasis was put on the education of women, and on rural education (Aybay 1998; Topses 1999).

One of the main aims of all the efforts was the development of the prototype of the “secular”, “modern” citizen devoted to “Atatürk’s principles”. No opportunity was missed for aiding the development of “feelings for the nation”, “national awareness and consciousness”, “love for the flag”; national special days/holidays and the flag salutations at schools were used as occasions for such consciousness raising.

Throughout the single-party period civics textbooks included headings such as the Nation, the State, the Republic, Democracy, Taxes, the Military and Military Service (Üstel 2005). What characterized these textbooks was the emphasis put on national unity and solidarity on the basis of Turkishness. Whether the Turkishness designed by Turkish citizenship in constitutional texts is in legal-political or in ethno-cultural terms is still a matter of debate in Turkey. While some argue that the formal definition of Turkish citizenship is based on territoriality rather than ethnicity (Kirişçi 2000), for some, Turkish citizenship oscillates between political and ethnicists logic (Yeğen 2004; Kadioğlu 2005). What is agreed upon, however, despite textual reference to a political notion of citizenship, practices during the nation formation process were exclusivist and differentials. The nationalization of citizenship in Turkey, as put by Kadioğlu, involved “the erasure of religious, ethnic and language related differences in the society. The Republic that evolved became a Republic of Turks at the end of various policies of homogenization of the population via exclusionary as well as assimilations policies” (Kadioğlu 2007, 291).³ Parallel to such a frame, civics textbooks promoted a Turkishness and presented an organic society along with a blind attitude toward the existence of other groups. Essentialism and a race-based tone (stress on ethnic identity, and belonging to a national unity) became more pronounced in the 1940s preceding the multi-party period.

The Multi-Party Period of Post-1950 and Citizenship Education

The 1950s multi-party period and thus, the general democratization of the country were reflected in the educational system and in the textbooks. The making of a good citizen were rooted in industriousness, studiousness, working hard, being someone, having a sense of responsibility (Yücel 1998). The chapters of citizenship textbooks started to include topics such as “democracy within the family”, “democracy at school” (Üstel 2005; Caymaz 2007).

In the 1960s, still more of an embracing of democratic citizenship is seen in the textbooks. A more “rights-based” understanding of citizenship with its universal connotations and the understanding that democracy is a way of life are to be found in the content and in the spirit of the texts (Üstel 2005). The program in 1968 is pretty systematic and contemporary both in its objectives and principles, and in its methods and techniques (Akyüz 1982).

Starting with the 1970-71 school year, History, Geography, and Citizenship were unified into a new course entitled Social Studies. The program was still very eclectic, with remains of a nationalistic structure and a newly acquired spirit of freedom and solidarity found together in the texts. Füsün Üstel tells us that this program “[promoted] the active, participating citizen” and “[was] the most democratic program in the entire

³ For the practices that do not coincide with the abstract, political definition of Turkish citizenship, see Yeğen 2004; Yıldız 2001; Aktar 2000.

history of the Republic” (2005, 261). Unfortunately, in 1973 this program was changed again, with the reemphasis on the well-known discourse on “upholding of Turkish nationalism”, “respect for Turkish moral values” and the like.

After the coup d’etat in 1980, an abundance of intimidation through perceived threats of all kinds—entailing an attitude of “we need to be open-eyed and waiting; we need to be ‘militant citizens’”—(Üstel 2005) and a religious streak seeped into the programs and through them into the newly named course textbooks: National History, National Geography, and Citizenship.

The Present Citizenship Education: Blending Citizenship with Human Rights?

The post-1980s are the years when Turkey increasingly integrated into global free market economy and carried out several reforms as part of the effort to join the European Union. Turkey has also implemented several reforms in order to bring its legal structure in conformity with international agreements and human rights regimes. For example, in response to the appeal by the United Nations for the implementation of human rights education at national level, a National Committee on the Decade for Human Rights Education was formed in 1998. These reforms found its reflection in the field of citizenship education and the course hitherto called Civics or Citizenship was renamed as Citizenship and Human Rights Education to be taught in the 7th and 8th grades for one hour a week, and a new program for that course came into being in 1998. During the same school year, a new elective course titled “Democracy and Human Rights” was included in the curriculum of the 10th grade.

The outline of the 7th grade “Citizenship and Human Rights Education” course that focuses on human rights themes is as follows:

1. The common heritage of humanity (with subtitles such as the concept of human; art, science and literature as common heritage)
2. The development of the notion of human rights (the concept of right; history of human rights, etc.)
3. Ethics and human rights (ethical foundations of human rights; responsibilities of being human, etc.)
4. Basic rights and freedoms (definitions of basic rights; the role of the state in the implementation of human rights; children’s rights)

The curriculum for the grade 8 “Citizenship and Human Rights Education” course, on the other hand, focuses more on the concept of citizenship, responsibilities and political literacy of citizens. The outline of this course includes:

1. Basic concepts of state, democracy, constitution, citizenship, citizenship rights and responsibilities
2. The protection of human rights (at the national and international level; importance of human rights education in the protection of human rights, etc.)
3. The elements of national security and national power (importance of Turkish military, internal and external threats to Turkey, etc.)
4. Basic problems concerning the protection of human rights

The incorporation of human rights themes into citizenship education is in itself an important step for the development of democracy and a human rights culture. However, a close analysis of the curricula and textbooks shows that human rights are particularized by many authors and that universal themes stand side by side with nationalist and authoritarian citizenship education.

The grade 8 curriculum is particularly problematic and the third chapter of the textbooks is illustrative of the representation of Turkey in the Turkish national

education system. This chapter situates Turkey in the contemporary world in relation to themes such as national security, threats to national unity, terror, state authority and citizenship responsibilities. Under these subtitles provided by the Ministry of National Education, all textbooks portray a Turkey which is always under threat by both internal and external enemies because of its geopolitical importance. The book prepared by the Ministry of National Education introduces this chapter as “[through this chapter] you will better learn how our enemies aim at achieving their ends with destructive and divisive practices” (Bilgen et al. 2001, 60). Who are these enemies? And what do they intent?

A discourse analysis of the presentation of internal and external threats is indicative of the militaristic and nationalistic logic underlying the Turkish education system. Internal threats are presented as “separatist and reactionary” (Bilgen et al. 2001, 63) circles, and they are portrayed as aiming at capturing the state power. In the Turkish context these “threats” refer to Kurdish and Islamic movements which, particularly after 1980, directed their criticism toward the allegedly neutral republican notion of Turkish citizenship. It is a fact that there are some radical Islamic groups and Kurdish separatist circles in Turkey. Nevertheless, a generalization of these problems in order to portray Turkey to be “always under risk” promotes an authoritarian notion of citizenship education, a duty-based citizenship, and a citizenry always on the look out.

Such a conception of Turkey also shapes the way other countries are perceived. Neighboring countries appear in textbooks as Turkey’s external enemies. According to the “Citizenship and Human Rights Education” textbook published by the Ministry, “Turkey has a very important geopolitical situation in the region and in the world. Because of this, many countries have several aims on our motherland. That is why Turkey is a country always under risk. The places that harbour destructive terrorist organizations are neighbouring countries which we think are our allies” (Bilgen et al. 2001, 80). Textbooks promote prejudices and negative stereotypes toward Turkey’s neighbours and warn students by unmasking real intents of our so called allies.

Such a representation of Turkey is accompanied by the exaltation of the Turkish military force and military service of citizens. This is because “Turkey is protected against both internal and external threats by the military forces.” Accordingly “the existence of a powerful military, even in times of peace” (Bilgen et al. 2001, 63) is legitimized by the presence of internal and external threats.

More worrisome is that these nationalistic and militaristic precepts are not limited to citizenship education courses but extend into several other subjects of the Turkish education system. A recent study involving a review of 190 textbooks in different subjects demonstrated that textbooks are imbued with nationalism, glorifying death, naturalizing wars and promoting xenophobic attitudes (Ceylan, Irzik 2004).⁴

The most striking course that aims at political socialization of young citizens is the course titled Studies in National Security. This is a mandatory course that has been taught since 1926 in the high school curriculum. It is taught by military officers (officers in uniform appear in civilian schools) and its textbook is written by military personnel. The current textbook encourages xenophobic attitudes toward other countries under titles such as “Secret plots on Turkey.” Whereas “Citizenship and Human Rights Education” textbooks do not cite names of countries when pointing out “external enemies” of Turkey, this book presents Greece and Armenia with their historical aims of creating “Great Greece” or “Great Armenia” that include Turkey’s Western or Eastern provinces. Students are also taught several recent historical issues from a militaristic perspective. Instead of developing citizens with a wide perspective and a

⁴ This is salient even in geography education whose importance is presented by an author as such: “In periods of war, it is necessary to know the natural resources, topography, population...and strategic places such as roads, bridges and dams of the enemy country well” (quoted by Çayır 2004: 101).

critical stance, this curriculum encourages students “to be suspicious of all foreigners, particularly people from neighbouring countries; to fear all differences... and to treat their non-Muslim friends as categorically different (in fact as non-Turkish)”. (Altınay 2004, 86).⁵ All these contents are legitimized on the basis of maintaining national unity and order.

The portrayal of Turkey as a country under risk shapes the conceptualization of relations between citizens and state as well as responsibilities of citizens. The 8th grade “Citizenship and Human Rights Education” curriculum outlines four basic “ways of carrying out citizenship responsibilities”: Voting, paying taxes, performing military service and obeying laws. The presentation of the responsibilities of a “good citizen” involves many problems and reflects the underlying logic of modern Turkish citizenship. First, democracy, in textbooks, is reduced to a voting process. Citizens are encouraged not to be a part of the democratic process but just to vote in times of elections. Second, military service is glorified and presented as undisputable. Apart from its militaristic tone, the identification of good citizen with a military service reduces “women’s citizenship to secondary status” (Altınay 2004, 83) since in Turkey only men are obliged to carry out military service.

In fact, gender differences receive no mention in citizenship education. Rather, women’s rights are presented as “granted by Atatürk revolutions of the republican period” (Bilgen et al. 2001, 26). However, these rights, as put by Üstel, provided women with a “logistic citizenship” (Üstel 2005) in bringing up new generations and contributing to national development and social solidarity. Textbooks never mention inequalities and discriminations women face in contemporary Turkish society. Third, the state is presented as a metaphysical institution that cannot be criticized. When writing about the importance of national security, the authors of the Ministry’s Citizenship textbook note that the common denominator of destructive and backwardist organizations is their critical stance towards “official ideology,” “state officials,” and “state forces” (Bilgen et al. 2001, 78). Thus, criticizing the state and official ideology is equated with the strategies of anti-systemic movements. Turkish citizenship education, in this sense, promotes, to use Kymlicka’s term, “an unreflective patriotism” (ib. 2001, 310) which glorifies the existing system. The republican citizen is expected, as Kadioğlu notes, to “follow rather than reach certain decisions via his or her own reflection” (ib. 2005, 117). It encourages a passive citizenry burdened with duties to protect national unity and the indivisibility of the country.

Concluding Remarks: Turkish Citizenship Education between Universalism and Particularism

Turkey is transforming itself according to its aspiration towards attaining the level of civilization and westernization as declared by early republican modernizers. Reforms gained a momentum in various areas following Turkey’s official candidacy in the European Union in 1999. One important reform in the field of education emerged as the inclusion of human rights themes into citizenship education in 1998. Compared to the various curricula of citizenship education of the single and multi-party period, the current program of study signifies a major step forward. It is a fact that there are still problems in terms of some authors who define some human rights from a statist perspective. However, the current curriculum, for the first time in the history of

⁵ Minorities recognized by the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 are composed of the non-Muslim population, namely Greek, Armenian and Jewish people. They are considered as “Turkish citizens” regardless of their religion and race. However, the textbook of the Studies in National Security keeps them outside of shared history of Turks: “the large majority comprising more than 95 percent of Turkey have shared the same fate for thousands of years and have blended with the same culture and goals” (quoted by Altınay 2004: 84-85).

citizenship education, is designed to acquaint students in detail with human rights in 7th and 8th grades. It provides educators with a leverage to develop a human rights culture and to raise pupils with a universal language of rights.

Despite its inclusion of human rights themes, however, citizenship topics of the current curriculum promote a particularistic notion of citizenship. It can be argued that citizenship education still maintains the four basic elements of the state-centric operation of Turkish modernity: Strong-state tradition, national developmentalism, organic vision of society, and a republican notion of citizenship (Keyman, İçduygu 2005). As for the republican notion of citizenship, it is often argued that Turkey modeled the French republican tradition. This is true in terms of a definition of citizenship that does not involve blood foundation. Turkish citizenship in Ministry's textbook is not defined on the basis of blood or race but rather it is noted that "A person who sees himself or herself as a Turk is a Turk" (Bilgen et al. 2001, 76). The textbook also refers to the Constitution: "Everyone who is tied to the Turkish State through citizenship ties is Turkish" (Bilgen et.al. 2001, 16). This parallels the abstract notion of citizenship in republican tradition in which differences are not recognized. However, Turkey's organic vision goes further than the French case in its non-recognition of differences. A comparison between French and Turkish citizenship textbooks illustrates our point. Social cohesion, in the French citizenship textbook by Lauby, is presented as based on being committed to Republican principles of freedom, equality and solidarity. This book contains "several colour pictures showing black people and minorities identifying with the national flag. The multiethnic French football team's victory in the 1998 World Cup is portrayed as demonstrating the integrative capacity of the Republic" (Osler, Starkey 2001, 301). In Turkey, on the other hand, the portrayal of any minority (for instance, Kurdish or Armenian citizens) in a citizenship textbook is still unthinkable. The manifestation of ethnic or religious differences in tightly defined, state-monitored, and the allegedly neutral public sphere is considered detrimental to national unity and social cohesion. In such a frame, citizenship education promotes a notion of citizenship not in terms of the language of rights but of duties and responsibilities toward the state and nation.

It can thus be argued that the existing "Citizenship and Human Rights Education" curricula involve a paradoxical content reflecting the historical paradox of Turkish modernity. On the one hand, it encourages a very particularistic, nationalistic, passive and authoritarian notion of citizenship. On the other hand, it (especially the 7th grade curriculum) includes detailed human rights content. The curriculum oscillates between maintaining a discrete particularistic Turkish identity and a will to be a part of the civilized world.

The current 7th and 8th grade "Citizenship and Human Rights Education" course, as recently stated by the Ministry of National Education, will be abolished next year. Starting with the 2008-2009 school year, the content of the course will be (is hoped to be) handled in the courses titled Social Studies, and History of Revolution and Atatürkism. This is part of a general reform that would allow an activity-based and student-centered education. For the new curricula, the democratization of Turkey's nationalistic, militaristic and particularistic elements that prevent the development of a civil notion of citizenship should be replaced by a more rights-based, universalistic vision.

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