

The Relationship between Cultural Power and Education in Light of the Development of Education in Türkiye over the Last Two Decades

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ABSTRACT *Over the last 20 years, Türkiye's education system has undergone a period of transformation. The process of universalization from primary to higher education was largely achieved as Türkiye prioritized regions with comparatively lower schooling rates by making grand investments and conducting major projects. Furthermore, hiring new teachers and investing in new schools and classrooms have increased the quality of education, even as schooling rates rose. These investments and improvements led to a simultaneous rise in both universalization and quality in Türkiye's education system. Significantly, they also led to increases in the democratic aspects of education; the coefficient regulation and the headscarf ban were removed. Diversity in elective courses also increased in response to social demand, and academic support for all students expanded. Together, these changes indicate that Türkiye's education system has overcome the challenges it had inherited from the past and has increased its capacity to become even more effective and equitable for all children.*

Keywords: Türkiye's Education System, Transformation, Massification, Democratization

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Introduction

Mass education emerged globally in the early 19th century and expanded in the aftermath of World War II to include higher education. Many nations, starting with the United States and the Western European countries, made it easier for all their citizens to access education, while implementing new, large-scale projects to improve their society's overall level of education. By the 1970s, mass education had spread to higher education in those countries; the enrollment rate in primary education neared 100 percent, and the process of universalization enabled more than half of the entire population to access higher education.

The driving force behind this expansion was the realization that human capital is the most powerful, long-term resource available to any given country. Increasing the average number of years of schooling per member of society not only contributes to their employability and increases their adult skills, it empowers them to make greater contributions to their nation's development. Accordingly, investing in human capital makes a significant impact on economic development as well as social peace and welfare.

Since the Republic of Türkiye's foundation, increasing the schooling rate has been among the stated priorities of almost every government. Significant progress has been made on that front, especially at the level of primary education. It is important to

acknowledge, however, that Türkiye lagged behind the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, in particular, by the early 2000s in terms of massification and universalization in education. Whereas many OECD countries had largely completed the process of universalization by the 1950s and thus began to prioritize the quality of education, Türkiye did not initiate universalization until much later. Accordingly, various large-scale projects have taken place since 2002 to promote massification in education and ensure that Türkiye could compete with other OECD states in that area.

From 2002-2022, Türkiye made significant progress with regard to almost all educational indicators. Due to the long-standing problems impeding access to education at all levels except primary, the country initially concentrated on improving access to education. Accordingly, additional schools and classrooms were built, prioritizing those provinces and regions where the schooling rate was relatively low. At that point, Türkiye dared to tackle the root causes of the problem, making investments nationwide rather than only in specific parts of the country. Consequently, those provinces and regions that had once suffered from schooling-related problems ended up on par with the rest. Massification in education thus occurred homogeneously across the nation.

Improving access to education in a large-scale education system, as in

the case of Türkiye, requires significant investment. That is why the Turkish governments made a massive investment to increase the number of schools and classrooms to oversee that transformation. It was also important for those investments to be managed in such a way that they would promote balanced growth. The investments Türkiye made at the time resulted in significant improvements; the government prioritized disadvantaged areas to bridge, rather than deepen the existing gaps. Those investments began to yield results within a rather short amount of time.¹ Accordingly, there was a notable increase in the schooling rate for all levels, from pre-school to higher education. For example, the pre-school enrollment rate for 5-year-old children increased from approximately 11 percent in the 2000s to 93 percent today. During the same period, the schooling rate at the middle school level soared from 44 percent to 90 percent.²

It is possible to better appreciate the positive impact of those improvements by taking a closer look at how the schooling rate changed at the provincial and regional levels. Thanks to the governments' investments, the schooling rate in many provinces that had been relatively low in the early 2000s surpassed the national average.³ Importantly, the gap between various regions within the country has been alleviated significantly. Those provinces in which the schooling rate was the lowest in 2000 witnessed an increase in those numbers, which eventually reached

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the same level as those provinces with the highest levels of enrollment.

In addition to the investments that Türkiye made at the time, systemic regulations played a significant role in the country's progress. Among other things, the decision to increase mandatory education from eight to twelve years strongly influenced the improvement in the schooling rate. Likewise, the country made notable progress vis-à-vis the schooling rate at the level of higher education. Compared to approximately 14 percent in 2002, the higher education schooling rate has increased to roughly 44 percent today.

As Türkiye began to reach its massification goals, it revisited its objectives and started concentrating on improving quality indicators. As the number of students continued to increase at all levels of education, it attached special importance to two priorities:⁴ keeping the average number of students per classroom low and moving the average number of students per teacher closer to the OECD average. Taking stock of the country's progress today,

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it is possible to say that both goals have nearly been reached. Whereas the total number of classrooms increased from approximately 300,000 to some 850,000 during the past two decades, the number of students taking classes in 56 percent –more than half– of those classrooms remains under twenty-five. At the same time, the country has constantly worked to hire a large number of teachers in an attempt to lower the average number of students per teacher. Hence the increase in the total number of teachers from approximately 500,000 in the 2000s to nearly 1.2 million today. Thanks to this investment in particular, the student/teacher ratio at all levels of education in Türkiye has moved closer to the OECD average.

Democratization in Education

The last two decades have been critically important for both massification and democratization in education. During this period, Türkiye ended long-standing, anti-democratic practices and began to take into consideration the people's demands. It is

a well-known fact that educational systems are responsible for helping students gain necessary, up-to-date skills, and for responding to contemporary demands. As such, Türkiye began to pay more attention to society's expectations from education as it took steps to promote massification. In retrospect, the past twenty years represent a turning point for the country's education system. It is particularly important to underscore that the process of massification in education benefited socio-economically disadvantaged social groups more than the general population. Accordingly, that period is significant both in terms of ensuring equality of opportunity in education and improving the democratization of education.

One of the most significant improvements occurred in the schooling rate among girls. The long-standing problems facing girls' enrollment in school were addressed within the same time frame, and the gender gap shrank, especially over the last decade. In many provinces where girls had been notably less likely to go to school than boys in the early 2000s, the schooling rate for girls came to surpass the schooling rate among boys.⁵ Indeed, the available data indicate that the schooling rate for girls has significantly increased at all levels of education. For example, the schooling rate at the level of higher education was 22.4 percent for males and 19.7 percent for females between the ages of 18 and 22 in 2007. Those numbers currently stand at 40.5 percent for males and 46.3 percent for females. In other words, the schooling



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rate for girls reached the same level as the schooling rate for boys –and even surpassed it at the level of higher education– for the first time during this period.

Over the last twenty years, Türkiye has repaired the damage that the social engineering projects of the previous decades had inflicted on society through education policy. Among those damaging policy decisions was the ban on the religious headscarf. Ironically, the public authorities of the time complained that girls could not be incorporated into the education system sufficiently –while imposing a ban on the headscarf to deny access to the female children of religious citizens. It is a well-known fact that Turkish women faced many challenges in

their attempts to overcome that ban, especially in higher education, and many who had the financial means to do so relocated to other countries. The authorities who implemented such policies were not only unimpressed by such dramatic stories, they failed to recognize the role of their restrictions within the context of violence against women and brain drain. Ultimately, Türkiye abolished the headscarf ban, arguably the single greatest obstacle to education, in 2013 and took the additional step of lifting related restrictions on the employment of women –a remarkable accomplishment for women’s socialization.

Another project for structuring the society had imposed restrictions on the access to higher education by

Türkiye’s Minister of Education, Mahmut Özer, attended the opening session of the Transforming Education Pre-Summit organized by UNESCO in Paris, in June 2022.
ESRA TAŞKIN / AA



One of 4 education campuses, providing a good quality education for the high student population, in the city of Şanlıurfa in south-west Turkey. The campuses include 259 schools, 10 hostels and 5 workshops that were all built in 2018.
HALİL FİDAN / AA

high school graduates who had studied religious instruction or completed vocational schools. The coefficient regulation decreases significantly the scores of students in vocational high schools and İmam Hatip high schools when they apply for the higher education programs. That practice, which dated back to 1999, functioned to discourage successful students, who could pursue higher education, from attending the İmam Hatip and vocational schools. Consequently, academically high-performing students mostly ignored both types of high schools, leaving these schools with an increasingly homogenous group of students who lacked academic merit and/or could not get into any other school.

Remaining in effect for more than a decade, that regulation not only prevented those students who could

potentially pursue higher education from receiving religious instruction, it inflicted severe damage to vocational education, which came with a heavy price tag for the labor market. That policy, which the authorities persistently implemented for long years, changed society's perception of vocational and İmam Hatip high schools. In this sense, there was a deliberate attempt to determine how society viewed certain institutions in addition to the choices that students made in secondary education. The negative impact of that measure, which the authorities considered education policy, was not confined to the education system. The labor market, too, had to endure the consequences of a disruption in the natural flow of students, as the inability to find employees with the necessary qualifications took a toll on Türkiye's economic development.⁶ That practice, which undermined the

balance of both types of high schools, ended after many attempts in 2012. Meanwhile, it became possible for students enrolled in other types of high schools to take elective courses on the Qur'an, the Life of Prophet Muhammad and religious knowledge. Accordingly, the Turkish government addressed an important, popular demand by making such courses available to students.

Discussion and Conclusion

In retrospect, it is perfectly clear that it would not have been possible to discuss the quality of education today had it not been for the massive investments made in the 2000s, since major investments geared toward massification would still have been at the top of Türkiye's education agenda. In other words, it is important to highlight that all of those investments and quantitative improvements laid the groundwork for enhancing the quality of education in Türkiye.

It is crucial to note that Türkiye did not achieve massification in education at the expense of quality. Quite the contrary: there has been steady progress in both massification and the quality of education. Initiatives like the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which track the performance of international students periodically, confirm that Türkiye has steadily improved its performance against the backdrop of its massification process.⁷

The country appears to have intended to make access to education conditional, rather than unconditional, and implemented that plan through various engineering projects until the 2000s. The headscarf ban and the use of coefficients, which hindered access to education, were among the mechanisms of that design

The contemporary debate on education quality ignores an important aspect. Quality is about a certain process. It is important to recall that those educational institutions that are considered high quality today originated from rather humble beginnings and became institutionalized over time. What matters is to nurture each humble beginning with a focus on quality and a culture of constant improvement. The expansion or establishment of new institutions is not inherently problematic for the quality.

Why, then, did Türkiye have to wait until the 2000s to oversee the transformation in education that occurred over the last two decades? Given that those OECD countries which we considered good examples and are now competing against increased

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their schooling rates at almost all levels to more than 90 percent after WWII and proceeded to focus on new projects to further improve the quality of their human capital, why did Türkiye experience such a delay? Why was 'quality' touted as the supposed reason behind that delay? Since other countries had various natural resources and Türkiye's primary resource has always been its human capital, did the authorities fail to predict that such a delay would be extremely costly? In truth, the answers to all these questions relate to the democratization of education that has taken place over the last twenty years. It is possible to argue that the debates over massification and the quality of education in Türkiye are not actually related to quality at all, but covertly serve another purpose. Put simply, the country appears to have intended to make access to education conditional, rather than unconditional, and implemented that plan through various engineering projects until the 2000s. The headscarf ban and the use of coefficients, which hindered access

to education, were among the mechanisms of that design.

The relationship between education and cultural power/hegemony has been the subject of debate for a long time.⁸ In Türkiye, the difference between being in power and exercising cultural power come up frequently. An oft-ignored point, however, is that the path to cultural power goes through education and, accordingly, any obstacle that bars access to education is intended to stop cultural power from changing hands. First and foremost, the Turkish authorities made no special attempt to increase the schooling rate before 2002 in order to perpetuate their hold on the existing cultural power. In other words, the massification of education was delayed, under the pretense of preserving quality, to prevent or delay the emergence of co-holders of cultural power and a shift in discourse. The use of coefficients, which aimed to push young people who could potentially access higher education away from the İmam Hatip schools, too, was directly related to cultural power. By taking that step, the authorities attempted to prevent individuals who would join the labor force and the civil service as college graduates from receiving religious instruction.

The use of coefficients against vocational education also created and worsened sociological division, as children born into socio-economically disadvantaged families were channeled into vocational training to limit their upward mobility and per-

petuate their disadvantages.⁹ In this regard, as Bourdieu stresses, education was made to serve as a mechanism that promoted and sustained social stratification.¹⁰

It is a well-known fact that education systems lay the groundwork for the cultural and social capital of cultural power and, accordingly, ensure the reproduction and continuity of social classes.¹¹ It would be suitable to argue that, taken as a whole, each of the various steps that Türkiye has taken in education over the last two decades disrupted the cycle of reproduction established in previous decades, which had perpetuated the lack of equal opportunity and made the (dis)advantaged more and more (dis)advantaged. The steps taken between 2002-2022 constitute a rupture that resulted in the existing cultural powerholders' loss of their advantage. As such, the transformation that occurred in the field of education over the last twenty years not only improved the quality of Türkiye's human capital but also marked the beginning of a new cultural era. ■

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