

# Social work education in Turkey at the crossroads: An analysis of educational trends and socio-political context in a historical perspective

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## Abstract

Similar to the trajectory in many countries, social work education in Turkey developed in the aftermath of World War II, the foundations of which were shaped along international dynamics rather than local context. In this regard, there has been an ongoing debate on localization of social work education. This article discusses the historical trajectory of social work education in Turkey through a systematic review of literature and analysis of data collected by semi-structured interviews with key informants. The implications of neoliberalism for the social work profession in Turkey reflect a dual framework where the human rights perspective co-exists with a faith-based approach.

## Keywords

Faith-based social work, glocalization, neoliberalism, social work education, Turkey

## Introduction

Social work education programmes in general aim at defining the meaning of social services, generating the knowledge base to inform its development, influencing the public perception of social work and producing professional leaders. As it was in the past, schools of social work today reflect the prevailing political, cultural and intellectual climate (Leighninger, 2000: cited in Reisch, 2013: 719). In this regard, both the mission and the role of social work education and the profession have evolved in line with contemporary social and political developments and have always reflected the

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nature of such important changes and developments as well as challenges within the focus of professional debates of the time. Abramovitz refers to the early evidence in the 20th century when the impact of the Great Depression revived nationwide social reform activities and argues the following:

Inability of private social agencies to respond adequately to the crisis renewed the struggles within social work over individual treatment and social change and over the relative merits of private charity and public relief. (Ehrenreich, 1985; Trattner, 1994; Woodroffe, 1964 cited in Abramovitz, 1998: 515–517)

Following that, the 1960s witnessed the second important transformation during the Golden Age where the growing human rights discourse alongside the rise and expansion of the social welfare domain had lasting impacts on the profession. Particularly, the profession focused more on community organization and mobilization for community self-determination (Abramovitz, 1998: 515–517). The 1960s also marked the initiation of a process by which the social work profession began to spread rapidly beyond its existing borders in Western Europe and North America. The third wave of the transformation started in the late 1970s within a neoliberal atmosphere where the focus of social work shifted from structural transformation to individual adaptation, resilience and compliance with the ‘disciplinary regime’ produced by the neoliberal policy environment (McDonald and Reisch, 2008; Soss et al., 2011, cited in Reisch, 2013: 718). In this context, as also stated by Jones (1996; cited in Garret, 2010: 349–350), the marginalization of social sciences teaching and the imposition of a narrowly functional competencies approach to learning played a critical role in reducing social work education to vocational training.

The reflections of those transformations in social work education and the profession have not been sufficiently discussed for many countries or regions across the world. Even though the transmission and the localization of the Western social work paradigm were explored in a few contexts, including the Middle East (Ragab, 2016), Arab nations (İbrahim, 2017), the Asia-Pacific region (Pawar, 2010; Shek et al., 2017) and for some thirdworld countries (Palattiyil et al., 2019), the Turkish experience has not yet been discussed in detail in the available international literature on the subject. Alongside its geographical location between Asia and Europe laden with a wide spectrum of social values ranging from those with western to eastern origins, Turkey is regarded as one of the most socially and politically polarized countries in the world (Somer, 2019). According to Rankin et al. (2013: 160) Turkey hosts a mixture of different cultural traditions in a contentious public space where the modernity process inherited ‘West’ as a viable model while a vibrant local culture coexisted as well despite the occurrence of some conflicts with the cultural forms attributed to Western values. Indeed, Turkish society has undergone a deep-rooted transformation within the process of globalization in the last three decades (Yoldaş and Yoldaş, 2015). Yet, with a more conservative population in comparison with Europe (Örmeci, 2020), Turkey could be described as a ‘torn country’ (Huntington, 1996; cited in Somer, 2019: 44) sheltering several cultural groups with different life styles (Rankin et al., 2013).

Similar to the experience of the other third world countries, social work education in Turkey was initiated by UN programmes in the 1960s (Kut, 2005: 11). However, the historical development of social work education in the country exhibited an irregular pattern where the number of social work departments has increased tremendously from 1 to 60 in the last 15 years. Such expansion also highlights the potential of social work education in the region and necessitates further discussion in an international context. In this regard, this article aims at discussing the historical trajectory of the 60-year-long social work education in Turkey to shed light on current dynamics, challenges and debates within the socio-political context in the country.

## Methodology

The research consists of a systematic review of the literature and analysis of data collected by semi-structured interviews with key informants.

### Systematic review

The systematic review was conducted by utilizing the five-step approach of Khan et al. (2003). Khan describes these steps as ‘framing questions for a review, identifying relevant work, assessing the quality of studies, summarizing the evidence, interpreting the findings’.

In this regard, books and journal articles as well as unpublished working reports and final reports of all national workshops of social work education published in Turkey since 1961 were reviewed. The international and national databases such as Ebsco, Science Direct, Google Scholar and Ulakbim (i.e. national academic database) were also used for review of all published scholarly articles on social work education in Turkey. In addition, all volume and issues of three specific sources were considered for the review: the first and the most well established refereed academic journal of social work, that is, *Journal of Society and Social Work* (Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet), the non-refereed journal of SABEM (*Research, Documentation and Training Foundation for Social Services*) and *Journal of Turkish Association of Social Workers*. Relevant publications were reviewed by the questions listed below:

1. What is the socio-cultural and political background of social work education in Turkey starting from 1961?
2. What are the reasons for the non-prevalence of social work education until the 2000s by linking it with the socio-political, economic and cultural variables?
3. What are the milestones of social work education since the 2000s?
4. What is the current situation of social work education in today’s Turkey?

### Qualitative research

The findings of the systematic literature survey were complemented by qualitative research employing a phenomenological approach. The research mainly employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the experiences and perspectives of social work academics on social work education in Turkey. In this regard, the data were collected through face-to-face and online-virtual in-depth interviews with five social work academics as key informants who are known to have intensive experience and expertise on social work education in the country. The participants were selected on the basis of Patton’s criterion sampling which involves reviewing and studying all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 1990: 176). In this respect, the target group comprised social work academics with PhD degrees in social work and who had written relevant publications (i.e. books, journal articles, reports, etc.) within the last 15 years on social work education in Turkey. Interviewees were experienced academics, aged 45–68, from five different universities in Turkey.

### Data collection

The interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours on the average and were recorded upon the verbal consent of the interviewees. The following four questions were discussed with the participants during the interviews:

1. How would you describe the background and social dynamics of social work education in Turkey starting from 1961?
2. How do you explain the non-prevalence of social work education until the 2000s by linking it with the socio-political, economic and cultural variables?
3. How do you explain the evolution of social work education since the 2000s?
4. How would you assess the outlook of social work education today?

## Analysis

The data analysis was primarily based on content analysis with a deductive approach framed by the research questions. The transcripts of interviews and the findings from the literature review were read by both researchers to identify common and distinct themes. After the discussion of all emerging themes, the analysis was structured along four main categories as follows:

- *Social dynamics in early years of social work education.* Military coup of 1961, external influences, evolution of social welfare state, urbanization and emergence of social problems;
- *Reasons for non-prevalence of social work education until the 2000s.* Challenges in higher education, lack of professional policy and influence of political atmosphere;
- *Uncontrolled expansion in social work education academic programmes since the 2000s.* Influence of European Union (EU) accession process, political priorities;
- *Contemporary outlook of social work education.* Standardization in social work education, quality of education, lack of professional competence and deformation in professional identity.

## Results

The historical trajectory of social work education in Turkey could be traced along three consecutive periods. The first period (1957–1983) has been shaped by the dynamics that lead to the emergence of social work education. The contextualization of the integration of social work education into the higher education system in Turkey and all related academic developments took place in the second period (1983–2002), while the current period since 2002 has been marked by expansion of social work education programmes in higher education.

### *First period: Development of social work profession (1957–1983)*

Social work education in Turkey was initiated with the establishment of the ‘Academy of Social Services’ in 1961 as the first school of social work under the ‘United Nations Technical Assistance Framework’ (Cilga, 2001: 78). In the early years, the courses in the academy were delivered by a mixed group of academics from countries such as the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Pakistan and India, due to the lack of qualified national academic staff trained in social work (Kut, 2005: 11). Following the establishment of the ‘Academy’, the Department of Social Work and Social Services was founded at Hacettepe University in 1967. In this regard, the first decade in the history of social work education in Turkey witnessed the emergence of two undergraduate programmes.

The 1960s in Turkey are also marked with important social and political developments starting with the military coup of 1960. The 1961 Constitution legislated in the aftermath of the coup framed the foundations of social welfare system in Turkey as it included the principle of the ‘social state’ in Article 2 (Karataş and Erkan, 2005: 117–118):

The most important thing was the 1961 Constitution, which was liberalistic, promoting [the] social welfare state and bringing liberty. The Academy was established under these circumstances. (Key Informant 1)

We have to point out the 1961 Constitution and the impact of [the] social state while discussing the establishment of social work education. (Key Informant 3)

The establishment of social work programmes in this period reflected the ongoing formation of a social welfare policy framework and paradigm in the country. Several internal factors including the emergence of new social problems as a result of mass internal migration and urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s as well as the changing political climate were all implicated in this. However, the external influence from the UN to initiate social work education and consequently to organize a system of social services could be identified as the key factor mobilizing the institutionalization of social work education:

Administrative, political and social structure was ready for social work/social services but in the end, the need did not stem from the grassroots. It is completely organized on the higher administrative level. (Key Informant 4)

There had been serious critics, such as ‘this is an American product’ because there were many foreign teachers. There had been frictions among students about the school being established with the initiation of the US. (Key Informant 2)

The lack of a significant grassroots movement in initiating the establishment of social work education in Turkey could also be regarded as a limitation for localization.

### *Second period: Social work in the Turkish higher education system (1983–2002)*

Following two military coups in 1960 and 1971, the third coup in 1980 remodelled the political and economic structure of the country (Karabelias, 1999) towards an authoritarian political regime (Özçetin et al., 2014) and a neoliberal economic order along the lines of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment programme of ‘Decisions of January 24th’ in 1980 (Akan, 2011).

Within this framework, the fundamental restructuring undertaken in public administration had devastating impacts on higher education. Particularly, the Department of Social Work and Social Services at Hacettepe University was closed down permanently (Kongar, 2014: 24), while the ‘Academy’ joined Hacettepe University and was renamed as the ‘School of Social Work’. Apparently, the 1980 military coup emerged as a significant factor in hindering the development of social work education in Turkey. During this period, the stigmatization of the department ‘as a place where leftists are trained’ and suppression of the academics as well as the school administration were the main developments shaping social work education:

We experienced difficult times during the 1980 Coup. There had been a military officer who was appointed to the school (. . .) The Academy was marked as leftist (. . .) So, we struggled hard to maintain the provision of education. (Key Informant 5)

Alptekin (2016: 65) also emphasizes the political reasons behind the developments in this period resulting in closure of one of the existing departments. He also points out that the schools represented two different paradigms in social work education: while the Academy had a methodological orientation with more focus on the vocational aspects of the profession, the Department of Social Work and Social Services at Hacettepe University was more engaged with other disciplines among the social sciences and prioritized a theoretical approach.

In the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, the efforts of the social work academics mainly aimed at institutionalizing the social work discipline in the higher education system and resulted in the development of graduate programmes in social work alongside the undergraduate programme by 1983 (Karataş and Erkan, 2005: 128). Such development cultivated an environment whereby social work education was carried out like a pilot project between 1983 and 2002. In a similar vein, Cilga (2005: 83) refers to this period as ‘the monopoly’ and problematizes ‘the lack of plurality and scientific competition in [the] academic domain’ as the number of social work programmes in different universities had not expanded and thus social work education had not become widespread across the country. Several dynamics seemed to play a role in this trajectory. First, social work education was regarded as ineffective to reflect the dynamic environment as a result of the rapid and dramatic societal transformations taking place between the 1970s and 1990s:

Between the years 1970 and 1990 the social dynamics were quite active. However, in social work, there was no social condition that would create a momentum. Towards the end of the 90’s there had been suitable societal conditions, but this time social work was not able to use this opportunity! A strategy to grow could not [be] developed. (Key Informant 4)

Boratav (2006: 148–149) points out that social services had been removed from the policy agenda in the post-1983 period in Turkey within the context of neoliberal policies enacted by the structural adjustment programme launched in 1980. That is to say, the neoliberal economic order had a direct impact on the social policy domain in Turkey between 1980 and 1988. As stated by Tanör (1994: 156), there was a radical shift in the 1980s from ‘the limited and short-dated freedom environment experienced by the 1961 Constitution’. Therefore, the transformation towards both the culture of democracy and the welfare state/social state paradigm in the previous period was not successful in cultivating an enabling environment to promote the development of social work education. This period also witnessed the emergence of significant social problems including growing populations of children, youth and elderly in the country as highlighted by Tomanbay (1999: 7). Moreover, Tomanbay points out that against the new social challenges brought by the rise of industrialization and rapid urbanization and the consequent need for professional interventions, the number of social work education programmes did not change at all.

During this period, there were debates on the need for a social work education policy that would be able to respond to the emerging social problems. Cilga (1988: 4–5) emphasizes the importance of developing social work knowledge compatible with the social context and dynamics of social change in Turkey. From the mid-1990s onwards, the establishment of relationships between social work programmes in Europe and the Department of Social Work – as the one and only department providing social work education in the country for this period – brought the international debates onto the national agenda particularly in relation to the revision of the curriculum in social work education. As a result of this process, the methodological orientation of the curriculum of the period was replaced by a generalist approach (AYKOM, 2002). With regard to social work education across the globe, the emphasis was still predominantly on the programmes in the United States and in Western Europe, thus further facilitating the former localization debates on social work and highlighting the lack of grassroots social work models in the Turkish context.

### *Third period (2002– . . .): Expansion and transformation*

The year 2002 marks another milestone in the history of social work education in Turkey with the establishment of a second department of social work in higher education institutions, namely the Department of Social Work at Baskent University. After a short while, many departments of social

work were established in several universities across the country. By 2015, the number of departments reached 36 (Alptekin, 2016: 15). As of 2020, a total of 134 universities in Turkey have departments of social work and additionally there are two open education programmes in two different higher education institutions (YOK, 2020).

The reasons for this rapid proliferation of the number of social work departments could be discussed along four main categories: first, the social work education community took the initiative to increase the number of available social work education programmes in higher education. Particularly in the early 2000s, the academic staff at departments of social work engaged into lobbying activities. Second, the direct and indirect impacts of the Great Marmara Earthquake in 1999 need to be considered. The key informants in our research mentioned the significant increase in the visibility of social workers and the profession *per se* after the earthquake:

(. . .) The main dynamic, according to me, was the earthquake. Our profession was active during the posttraumatic relief efforts. The School (the school of social work) also put a lot of effort to write on that issue, organized symposiums, and invited international experts on the topic during that time. (Key Informant 1)

The third category relates to the national and international policy contexts and policy developments. The candidacy process for EU membership together with all related regulations and legislative changes undertaken for the compliance in this process were all considered to have had an effect on the development of social work education and the profession in the country (Taşgın and Özel, 2011: 189):

There had been a pressure from European Countries. There were some requirements for being a candidate country for the EU and one of them was decreasing the social problems in the country. (Key Informant 1)

During 2000s, [the] EU Process helped the social services to develop. It was recognized that the number of social workers were too few. This was one of the important factors. The Government realized this deficiency and founded social work departments in three universities in 2006. (Key Informant 4)

In relation to the national socio-political developments directly or indirectly affecting social work education and the profession in Turkey, the electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 and consequent transformations in the realm of social policy constitute an important component. This process could be regarded as a transformation under a neoliberal conservative government towards minimizing the state through weakening the role of state institutions (Doganay, 2007). Boratav (2006: 174) emphasizes the fundamental impact of the IMF and World Bank on social policy in Turkey in the early 2000s where the fight against poverty was prioritized as a precaution against prevailing social inequalities. That is to say, social policy was regarded as being limited to transfer payments to those who would otherwise be unable to participate in the market economy, reflecting an adaptation of the 200-year-old 'Poor Laws' of England to the contemporary conditions in Turkey in the 2000s (Boratav, 2006: 174–175). In addition to the impact of social assistance in reducing social inequality, the political outlook of Justice and Development Party also considered the associated impact on the voting behaviour of the poor community. In this regard, Metin (2011: 194) mentions that social assistance has been prioritized by AKP as the main component of the social state in a clientelistic manner under a neoliberal regime. Such policy developments brought a rapid expansion in the implementation of several new social assistance programmes in a short period and resulted in reducing and limiting the social work domain to social assistance only. The incorporation of this policy outlook into the education policy resulted in the establishment of social work programmes in almost all of the new public universities in

Turkey. (The number of universities in Turkey has sharply increased in the past two decades. There are 209 universities in Turkey as of 2019–2020 academic year.)

Key informants mention that the establishment of new departments of social work in Turkey did not occur as part of a planned process or as a project. Moreover, the successive and rapid proliferation of departments were undertaken without engaging in any cooperation or collaboration with the existing departments or contributing to scientific debates:

Political reasons (. . .) since the number of students increased, the aim might be to absorb the youth population. It is quite easy to open a university, or a department. There is a template, an educational model, if you visit the website of [the] Higher Educational Council. Then you fill out the forms, print them. You add three Professors. Their academic background doesn't matter. (Key Informant 1)

Social work seems to be one of the easiest departments to open because the curriculum for the first two years consist of general courses on social sciences. (Key Informant 2)

While the number of departments of social work increased tremendously in this period, the controversies about the quality of education as well as the professional competence of the graduates of those departments remained. Karataş (2011: 65) points out that most of the new departments were established in universities which are still in the process of development and are unable to cater for the mass courses of social work programmes.

The debates and objections to the rapid establishment of social work departments in this period were also intensified with the commencement of the open education social work programmes in two universities in Turkey. Social work programmes in open education are structured upon a distance-learning framework that does not involve any face-to-face or synchronized learning environment while providing very limited practice training opportunities and evaluating the learning outcomes by means of multiple-choice exams (SHOD, 2020: 7). As of 2020, 13,612 students are enrolled in the two open education social work programmes (OSYM, 2020). These programmes have been severely criticized by both practitioners and academics because the quality of education in the programmes lagged far behind international standards.

In the second half of the 2000s, the debates on 'localization' of social work education in Turkey expanded towards a new dimension that involved the duality of 'rights-based' vs 'faith-based' approaches in social work. This could be regarded as a reflection of the existing polarization between 'religious and secular' orientations within the society which dates back to the late Ottoman and early republican period of modernization (Somer, 2019). Though not vocalized, the departments of social work in Turkey differ considerably in their approach to social work as a discipline as well as a profession. It should be noted that some departments would incline towards adopting a faith-based approach while others would remain within the mainstream social work. This outcome is closely related to the historical development and socio-political context of social work education in Turkey. As summarized by the interviewees, given the historical origins, social work education in the country exhibits pro-Western characteristics within which newly established schools are expected to mobilize the emergence of a local and national model compatible with the social structure and value systems (i.e. role of religion) in the country:

A reason why social work in this country couldn't have been developed properly is lack of a model sensitive to local characteristics and framed with universal values. We forgot the local characteristics. (Key Informant 4)

The first school of social work has an ideological stance. It is perceived as so. Therefore, there is a tension in between some social work academics and the current government. The newly established social work programs at different universities relate the first social work department with [the] 'western social work



idea'. They think that there should be a local, a national model. Turkey is a Muslim country and philanthropy is an important factor. Hacettepe is thought to basically exclude this philanthropy. This creates a duality. (Key Informant 3)

Apparently, as reflected in the following words from an opposing perspective, there is yet no clear agreement over this argument:

The tradition of philanthropy in [the] Ottoman [era] could not [be] transformed into a professional model because its basis was different. The latter put the individual into the center, while the former put the sake of Allah. Maybe there could be a discussion around the trusts (foundations) which were important in Ottoman times. (Key Informant 4)

Moreover, the discussion so far has been far from clarifying the ambiguity on the form a national model compatible with the social dynamics should take. Even though a widespread discourse since 2005 basically objected to the approach of the first department established in 1961 as being pro-Western, the discussions and suggestions have been far from developing a context for this model:

I used to think that there was a duality (faith-based and secular based social work) in social work in Turkey, now I think that, academics are just seeing the career opportunities in the newly established schools. I don't think there is a strong academic accumulation and human resource[s] to develop a faith-based social work. These academics are just opening up positions for their academic career, by repeating religious concepts (such as alms) and they are actually far from the knowledge and value base of social work. What they call as 'faith based' is the integration of Islamic concepts to social work. But they don't offer a systematic model. (Key Informant 4)

## Discussion

In the last two decades, the visibility of the social work profession in Turkey has substantially increased together with the rapid expansion of both the number of social work programmes in higher education and the number of students enrolled to these programmes. However, this unplanned and ad hoc expansion process led to serious concerns with respect to the quality of social work education. This is quite in line with the experiences of other countries where the growth pattern of the social work profession shared similar characteristics with the Turkish case. In highly populated countries, such as China and India, there occurred a substantial proliferation of schools of social work at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, but it has not been certain whether such massive expansion would be commensurate with minimum expected standards in terms of infrastructure, education and practice (Pawar, 2010: 902). Moreover, Shek et al. (2017: 3) question the authenticity of social work teaching at universities in China as many senior social work educators are sociologists who do not have frontline social work practice experience. Similar enquiries should be undertaken for the case of Turkey.

For the last two decades, the localization of social work education has been intensely debated in Turkey. Tomanbay (2005: 59) further argues that this has been an ongoing debate ever since the initial establishment of social work education in the 1960s where the entire knowledge base, including books, course materials, and so on, used in this period referred to the issues and problems specific to the American society. Lavalette and Iokamidis (2011: 145–6) draw attention to the similarity of such patterns among different countries including Turkey, Greece, Italy, Korea, Latin America and Vietnam. They refer to the common trait as the role of the open military interventions in each of these countries which is followed by a period of reconstruction and rehabilitation including technical expertise in the design of social welfare, development and supervision of social work education and training, curriculum design as well as translation of American social work texts.

Therefore, the inheritance of the knowledge base, legal context and technical expertise from the United States resulted in development of social work theory as alien and irrelevant to the local cultural contexts in these countries. Similar problems and processes are also discussed for social work education in countries of the Asia-Pacific region (Shek et al., 2017: 2–3). Furthermore, Ragab (2016) identifies this process as ‘Professional Imperialism-by-Demand’ for pre-industrializing countries (including the Middle East).

The relatively late establishment of social work education in Turkey (by 1961) could be attributed to the lack of a comprehensive social welfare approach and the late urbanization process when compared with Western Europe (Buğra and Keyder, 2003). Moreover, due to the traditional social structure, the system of social services has been compensated by the informal support mechanisms (Çağlar, 2012: 37). Also, significantly different from Western societies, the elements of autonomy and civic participation in Turkey could be considered as ‘weak and incomplete’ (Tanör, 1994: 301).

Against this background, social work education in Turkey was founded as a result of international dynamics and exhibited a typical replica of the prevailing social work paradigm in the United States. In this regard, the development of social work education in the country has not been shaped in line with any social movement or societal dynamics. The key issue here is how to develop a structure founded on the basis of internationally recognized values, knowledge and skills of social work while still being able to respond to the needs of the society due to its compatibility with the local social dynamics. Ragab (2016) suggests an authentication process as a solution whereby professional practices would be initiated from and developed on the basis of own national social and cultural realities. Akşit (2004: 8–9) contextualizes this debate for social sciences by defining the typologies of social scientists in the third world and argues that any social scientist who focuses only on the global level will fail to understand the local context, while on the contrary the emergence of social scientists with a purely local focus and localization of social sciences would pave the way for religious, nationalistic and ideological discourses. In this regard, glocal social and cultural processes, structures and practices can be best understood with glocal theoretical and conceptual frameworks. As also mentioned by İbrahim (2017), a glocal approach is also essential in generating the knowledge in social work. However, the key informants in our research emphasized that despite the recent expansion, the academic social work community in higher education has had insufficient potential to construct an alternative and local social work model. This could be related to the devastating impacts of the neoliberal policies in higher education on social work academia. That is to say, the dynamics such as performance and competitiveness (Aydn Turan et al., 2019) occurring as reflections of the neoliberal education model on academic life force the academic staff towards promotion-oriented work rather than needs-based intellectual growth. Moreover, the problem of quality in social work education emerges as a result of inappropriate academic staff placements in newly established social work departments with those from various social science backgrounds lacking knowledge, skill and competence in social work (Alptekin, 2016: 114).

The most important obstacle hindering the development of a social work model specific to Turkey could be identified as the polarized social and political structure in the country. Regarding the socio-political context, Erdoğan (2016) argues that the dual structure in the political domain has seriously affected societal life and deepened the existing polarization. Such social polarization also led to the emergence of a squeeze for the social work profession under this duality and the consequent transformation of social work into a political and ideological tool. Against this background, the discussion on a country-specific social work model for Turkey could also serve to assist in developing solutions for reconciliation to overcome the polarization in the society. Sacco and Hoffman (2004: 165) refer to the importance of the reconciliation perspective as being consistent with the core values set out by international social work associations as well as training bodies and highlight the importance of developing a culture of self-reflection and accountability on the basis of rigorous individual and collective self-reappraisal into the endeavours of social work. Would it be worth thinking about restructuring

social work education in Turkey on the basis of those principles highlighted by Sacco and Hoffman (2004)? Would social work education itself be capable of developing an alternative approach towards the social and political polarization in the country? Why not?

## Conclusion

This article aimed at analysing the historical development of social work education in Turkey against the socio-political context. In this regard, three main periods were identified with respective milestones within this framework. For the 1960s, the newly established constitutional context was influential due to the emphasis on social rights. However, the influence of international dynamics as well as the rise of the neoliberal economic order in the aftermath of the military coup in the 1980s had direct impact on the development of the social work education discipline in higher education in the following period while the closing down of the department reflected the interplay between the social work domain and the political context of the period. Moreover, the proliferation of social work departments and consequent uncontrolled growth in social work education in the 2000s resulted in the rediscovery of the social work profession albeit in a neoliberal context as part of a social work system evolving into a social welfare based model within a philanthropic paradigm. In this regard, different from the Western experience, the influence of neoliberalism on the social work profession in Turkey has been through an Islamic interpretation. As of today, the most essential problems in social work education emerge as the quality of academic staff in social work departments and the implementation of the particular programmes of social work education. It is evident that the existing social work education programmes in Turkey are far from fulfilling international principles and standards. In this regard, further research is necessary to explore and analyse the educational paradigms shaping the available programmes in various departments of social work in higher education in Turkey.

## Limitations

The research presented here has some limitations. The research focus was limited to explore the history of social work education within the evolution of the political context in the country. Also, the key informants were only selected from social work academics, which provided a single-sided perspective and exhibits a limitation for the research question. This could be eliminated in further research by including policy makers, administrators, practitioners and students as participants.

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