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Baysu, G.; Agirdag, O.

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Turkey: Silencing ethnic inequalities under a carpet of nationalism shifting between secular and religious poles

Gülseli Baysu[1][*] and Orhan Agirdag[2][3]

[1] Centre for Identity and Intergroup Relations, School of Psychology, Queen's University Belfast, United Kingdom

[2] Laboratory for Education and Society, KU Leuven, Belgium

[3] Department of Educational Sciences, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

[*] Corresponding author is Dr. Gülseli Baysu, Queen's University Belfast, University Road, BT7 1NN, United Kingdom, Email: G.Baysu@qub.ac.uk

Abstract

This article offers a systematic review of educational and sociological research in Turkey on the relationship between race/ethnicity and educational inequality between 1980 and 2017. A major challenge regarding this research topic is that ethnic differences were a taboo topic in Turkey until recently, so systematic information on ethnic differences is lacking. Still, three research traditions could be distinguished, namely research that focuses on (1) regional differences, (2) language differences and (3) religious differences. The existing studies predominantly embrace a deficit perspective and quantitative research methods and a more positivistic approach to social sciences. Currently, alarming developments are visible: improvement in minority language rights in education is halted and the violent armed conflicts have started again. Finally, the recent migration developments, with the influx of three million Syrians, remain largely out of the scope of the literature

1. Introduction

This review aims to provide an overview of the educational system and its recent changes as well as an overview of the research on ethnic inequality in education in Turkey. A major challenge in doing this is the fact that ethnicity and ethnic differences were a taboo topic in Turkey until recently, and actually, it is still a taboo topic to some extent even in academic circles (Somer, 2002). For instance, the last time that national data on ethnicity were collected was in 1965, in the Population Census, that included a question on mother tongue (Koc, Hancioglu, Cavlin, 2008). Hence, it is hard to identify different lines of research, like in France and the French speaking part of Belgium (e.g. this volume). Still, a body of literature that uses satisfactory proxies for ethnicity emerged, which provide a good overview of ethnic differences in education.

The chapter is divided into five main parts. After this introduction, we will describe the main characteristics of the educational system and policies in Turkey and the history of ethnic and immigration related issues. The third part describes the methods we used in the process of conducting this literature review. In the fourth part, research conducted in the Turkey on the relationship between ethnicity and educational inequality is analyzed in terms of regional, linguistic and religious differences. Finally, the conclusion and discussion section summarizes and critically analyzes the main challenges in the literature and the educational system in Turkey.

2. Education, migration and ethnic diversity in Turkey

2.1. Educational system

The Turkish Republic was established in 1923 out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and produced profound social, economic, political and cultural changes to create a new nation-state based on single national culture (Turks) and a single language (Turkish) with the ideals of secularism and nationalism (Arat, 1998). The foundation of the 'secular' modern

educational system was key to these changes (Toprak, 2005). Therefore, a unified and centralized educational system was adopted in 1924: All educational institutions were brought under the Ministry of National Education. The aim was to abolish the duality between religious and secular education in favor of the national and secular education system, fashioned on the Western European model (Gök, 2007). The years between 1923 and 1946 are called the mono-party period in Turkey when the country was governed by The Republican People's Party, founded by Kemal Atatürk. Educational policies of the era were based on political socialization to these new social, political and cultural values (Gök, 2007).

In terms of the educational structure, a 5+3+3 structure was adopted in the education system until 1997, with 5 years of compulsory primary school, followed by 3 years of elementary school (lower secondary education) and 3 years of high school (upper secondary education). Although extending the compulsory education to 8 years was on the political agenda since the 1970s, it was only in 1997 when a new structure was adopted in the education system with a comprehensive and compulsory 8-year primary school education, followed by 3-4 years of high school. In 2012, a new 4+4+4 structure in the education system has been enacted, and the period of compulsory education has been extended to 12 years, divided into three sections: 4 years of primary school, 4 years of elementary school and 4 years of high school. The school starting age has also changed from 69-80 months to 60-66 months (ERG, 2012; Gök, 2007; Gün & Baskan, 2014).

We will now describe in details the current educational system (see Figure 1). Preschool education for children lasts generally 2 years between the ages of 3 to 5 years and is covered by independent kindergartens, nursery classes within a primary education school or practice classes affiliated to other related education institutions (MoNe, 2015). Nursery classes within a primary education school are public, while the rest of the preschool education is private. During the eight-year compulsory primary education system, there has been an

increase in preschool education rates. Accordingly, research indicates that the percentage of Turkish students who attended preschool slightly increased between 2003 and 2012. Still, in 2012, Turkey had the lowest rate of preschool attendance among the 68 countries that participated in the PISA study. Only 8% of Turkish students attended more than one year of preschool, while the average in other countries is 67%. And only 30% of Turkish students attended 'some' preschool, while the average in other countries is 89% (Agirdag, Yazici & Sierens, 2015). Comparing 2012-2013 to 2014-2015, there has been only a small increase (12%) in the number of students enrolled in preschool from 1 077 933 students in 5 018 schools to 1 209 106 students in 6788 schools (MoNe, 2013, 2015).

Primary education is the same for all pupils and takes four years. Primary education can be public or private. Elementary schools also last four years and there are currently two types of elementary schools, general and Imam Hatip religious elementary schools. General elementary schools can be public or private. As for high schools, there are two broad categories, each with several types: General high schools (Regular High School, Anatolian High School, Anatolian Teacher Training High School, Science High School, Social Sciences High School, Fine Arts and Sports High School, Private High Schools) and Vocational and Technical High Schools (Imam Hatip Religious High School, Anatolian Imam Hatip Religious High School, Vocational and Technical High Schools, Private Vocational High Schools) (MONE, 2015).

The curricula of the all the public and private schools are being prepared centrally by the related units of the Ministry of Education. "Anatolian" high schools and Science High Schools combine a one-year long English language education and a 4-year general academic education that prepares for university, and they provide "better" education than general secondary schools (In the past, there were also so-called "super schools" with the same function) (Gök, 2007). With the adoption of the new educational system, regular high schools

have been converted to Anatolian, Vocational or Imam Hatip High Schools. Vocational schools prepare for both higher education and labor market.

Imam Hatip Religious Schools were originally established to raise preachers but currently they have become religiously-oriented general elementary and high schools that prepare for university. In addition to regular curriculum of general high schools, they learn skills and knowledge that prepare them for being clergymen. The religious subjects that make up roughly 40 percent of the curriculum include Quran, Arabic, Tafseer (Quranic exegesis), Hadith (Prophetical traditions), Qalaam (Islamic Theology), Fıqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), Seerah (Prophetical biography), Rhetoric, and Comparative History of Religions (Aşlamacı & Kaymakcan, 2017).

Higher education includes all the educational institutions which are based on secondary education, and which provide at least two years of higher education. Higher education consists of universities (generally 4 years or 5 years including one-year long English language education), conservatories (4 years), colleges and vocational colleges (2 years) and private universities (4 years or 5 years including one-year long English language education).

Age 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 6 5 3 Age

PhD

Medical Specialty

PhD

PhD

Master

III
II
I

IV
III
II
I

III
II
I

III
II
I

II
I

Undergraduate

Master
II
I

Undergraduate

VI
V
IV
III
II
I

Undergraduate
V
IV
III
II
I

Associate Degree

II
I

II
I

Undergraduate
IV
III
II
I

IV
III
II
I

Preparatory Class   Associate D.   Open Learning

Higher Education

XII
XI
X
IX

XII
XI
X
IX
Preparatory

XII
XI
X
IX

Apprenticeship Training

Non - Formal Education - Adult Education - Continuous Education

General Secondary Education   -   Vocational and Technical Secondary Education

VIII
VII
VI
V
IV
III
II
I

Primary School+Lower Secondary School
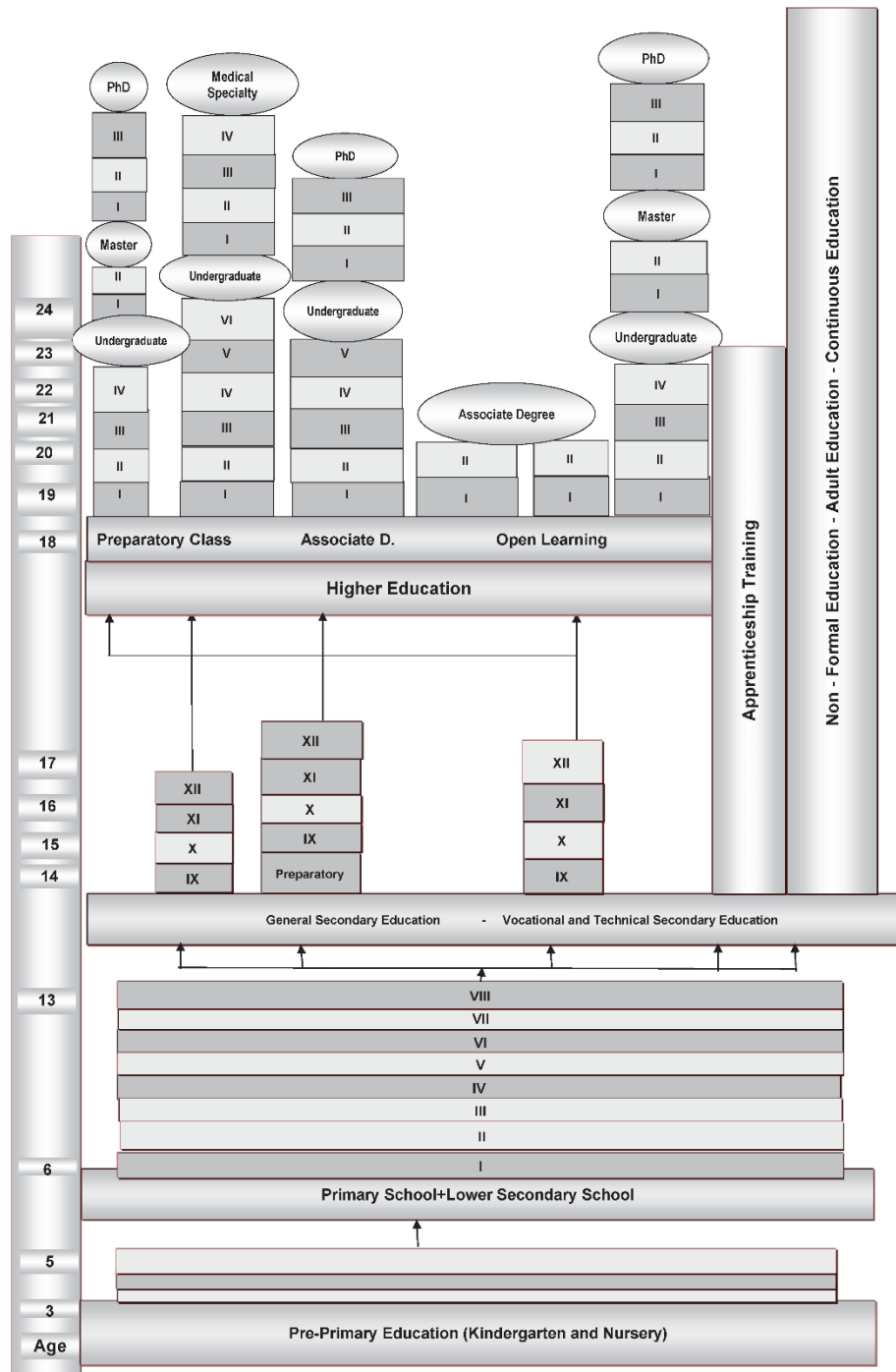
Pre-Primary Education (Kindergarten and Nursery)

Figure 1. Turkish National Education System (adapted from MoNE, 2015)

Beginning from preschool education, students can attend public or private schools at all levels. Although the education quality varies to great extent in these private schools, these schools provides intensive teaching of at least one foreign language, usually English, in contrast to most public schools (except for Anatolian high schools). There are also foreign and minority private schools. Foreign schools are private high schools founded by foreigners, like American, French or German schools, where both Turkish citizens and foreigners can attend. Minority Schools provide education at all levels and are founded by Greek, Armenian and Jewish minorities—secured with the Treaty of Lausanne. Only the students who are citizens of Republic of Turkey and who belong to those minorities can attend these schools (MONE, 2015).

There are also open elementary and high schools. Open elementary schools provide distance education to those graduates of primary school who are at least 14 years old but could not attend to elementary school. Open high schools also provide distance education to those who drop-out from other types of high schools or for those who cannot go to school regularly (MONE, 2015). With the 4+4+4 structure in education, an increase has been observed in the percentage of students enrolled in open high schools (63% increase compared to the academic year 2011-2012) (Eğitimsen, 2016).

The Turkish educational system employs several centralized examinations to allocate students into different types of education, schools, or study areas. The two main types of examination are for entry to secondary education (elementary or high school) and to university. The exact content, timing, and the number of these exams have changed from time to time, depending on the changes in the educational system. When the educational system adopted a 5+3+3 system, many selective schools (such as Anatolian high schools and some private schools) had a combined secondary school education including elementary and high school education. Students who wanted to study in these selective schools had to take a

centralized examination at the end of primary school (that is, after 5 years of schooling). When the system changed to a comprehensive 8-year compulsory education, students had to take the central examination after 8 years of schooling and the combined secondary education was cancelled. With the recent change to the 4+4+4 structure, now every student has to take the exam (or more precisely, the series of exams in several topics) at the end of elementary school (after 8 years of schooling) and students are oriented towards different types of schools depending on their choice and their performance in these exams. Just very recently as of September 2017, the president has announced that this exam should be abolished, and the Ministry of Education has confirmed that there will be no centralized exam as of this year. However, it is unclear at the moment how the students are going to be oriented towards different types of high schools. The university entrance examination has also changed in content and structure several times (shifting between one to two-stage exams). The examination has several topics such as math, science, Turkish language, history, foreign languages, and students are required to answer the questions in the areas that are essential for their choice of education.

2.2. Educational policies

There are two general trends that can be observed in the changes in the Turkish educational system: increasing religiosity and neoliberalism (Altınyelken et al., 2015). Increasing religiosity in the school system should be understood in light of the duality and the struggle between secular and conservative-religious groups which has remained at heart of the Turkish society and politics. Issues such as the so called Imam Hatip religious schools, the extent and content of religion in the curriculum of regular schools or the use of headscarf by students and/or teachers in schools have been areas of political struggle (Toprak, 2005). With the rise of the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP), which arose from moderate Islam in Turkish politics, the conservative religious elites that have been pushed out of political

power struggles regained strength (Toprak, 2005). The educational system has become vital to the societal transformations that AKP regime foresaw for the Turkish Republic. Educational policies have therefore incorporated several reforms in favor of conservative religious agenda (Altınyelken et al., 2015).

A case in point is the case of Imam Hatip religious schools. In 1924, five years of primary school was made free and compulsory and religious schools were abolished. In 1950s, religious Imam Hatip schools were opened. In 1970s, the elementary level religious schools were closed and then reopened. In 1997, when the compulsory education became comprehensive 8 years, the elementary level of Imam Hatip religious schools were closed again. In 2002, the change in the structure of the system (4+4+4) allowed for the establishment of Imam Hatip elementary schools once again. With lower starting age to the school, the children, who graduated from primary school, are able to continue to these schools to have religious education at the ages of 9-10 (Altınyelken et al., 2015; Gün & Baskan, 2014; Köseleci, 2015). Just like the structural changes in the education system, the terms of the university entrance examination have been an arena of political struggle between secularists and conservatives. Graduates of religious Imam Hatip schools were permitted to study only in theology departments at university in 1950s; then in 1974, they were allowed to study at any department; in 1999 the rules changed again so that they became subject to a lower coefficient in the examination, which created a competitive disadvantage; finally, in 2009, they were again allowed to study at any department with lifting of this coefficient (Altınyelken et al., 2015).

One of the most noteworthy results of 4+4+4 structure in education system has been the significant increase in the number of Imam Hatip schools both at the elementary and high school levels (ERG, 2012). 1099 Imam Hatip elementary schools were opened in 2012-2013 and this number increased to 1961 schools in 2015-2016, and continued to increase to 2.777

schools in 2016-2017; in parallel, the number of students enrolled in such schools increased seven times. Similarly, the number of students in Imam Hatip high schools increased from 381,771 students in 708 schools in 2012-2013 to 555,870 students in 1149 schools in 2015-2016 and to 634,406 students in 1408 schools in 2016-2017 (Eğitimsen, 2016; 2017). Adding "open" Imam Hatip high schools to these numbers, 15% of high school students in Turkey are now enrolled in Imam Hatip high schools (Eğitimsen, 2016).

A following change was the increase of religious elective courses in regular elementary schools such as the courses on The Quran, Prophet Muhammad's life and Fundamentals of Religion. Although in theory students can choose from a larger number of elective courses, due to physical environment and/or limited human resources, research suggests, that the elective religion courses became "compulsory" in the sense that either the alternative elective courses were not offered or students were feeling pressured to select these courses by other students and/or their parents (ERG, 2012; Gün & Baskan, 2014).

After the attempted military coup of July 2016, there have been further changes in the educational policies towards a conservative religious agenda. Turkey has been under the state of emergency since July 2016; and several decrees under the state of emergency have been declared including the ones that directly affect the education system. While there is no peer-reviewed research available on the current changes, Eğitimsen (Education and Science Workers' Union) (2017) has recently published a report. Accordingly, 33128 teachers, 5318 academics and 1194 administrative personnel who work in schools under the National Ministry Education have been fired and many others have been suspended from their works. There have been several changes in the curriculum, towards further encouraging a "religious and nationalist" mind-set, with its emphasis on "Turkishness" and Sunni Islam (Eğitimsen, 2017). The news that the concept of jihad has been introduced into the curriculum and

evolution has been removed from science classes has attracted worldwide attention (Altuntaş, 18.09.2017, BBCnews).

The other major change in the educational policies has been towards neo-liberal policies. The provision of free education at all levels was recognized as the responsibility of the state, therefore most schools were state-funded (Gök, 2007). In the post-1980 era, the way the state has approached education shifted towards reducing government spending and encouraging privatization. For instance, private universities were already supported by government policies via tax concessions and land grants. The Justice and Development Party supported the neo-liberalization of education further, for instance, with the use of public funds to support private schools at both primary and secondary education levels. Accordingly, while there were only 93 private (primary or secondary) schools in 1932, their number increased to 240 in 1965, and to 1129 by 2001, to 1378 in 2005 (Gök, 2007). In 2011-2012, there were 4664 private schools making up 10% of the schools and this percentage jumped to 18.5 in 2015-2016 (Eğitimsen, 2016).

In addition to privatization and reducing the state expenditures on education, neo-liberal policies require restructuring of the education system by increasing effectiveness, efficiency and accountability. Thus, performance evaluation indicators for teachers and academics along with standardized competitive tests for students are valued more in neo-liberalism (Buyruk, 2015; Polat, 2013). While schools and teachers in Turkey are not systematically evaluated with standardized test, there is enormous focus on standardized testing. More specifically, transitions of students between stages from primary to higher education are based on standardized and centralized tests as explained under the section on Educational System. Preparing students for these tests has become a major industry, together with private institutions specialized in intensive revision courses for these exams. The number of such private courses showed a dramatic increase under the Justice and Development Party

rule (Buyruk, 2015). Reliance on these private courses for entrance into selective schools further deepens the education inequality in society (Polat, 2013).

What remains unchanged throughout all these changes is that the Turkish education system is highly centralized. This is partly in contrast with neo-liberal developments in many industrialized countries where decentralization is core element of reforms (Hood, 1995). In Turkey, all educational policies including curriculum development and assignment of teachers and administrators are formulated by the Ministry of National Education since 1924. This hyper centralized system makes it possible to foster another prominent feature of the educational system, that is, nationalism and the assimilationist pressures towards the Turkish culture and language. Turkey has historically been characterized by the denial of the diversity of its population. The education system thus has a mono-typical and mono-cultural structure, and mostly excludes religious, cultural, and ethnolinguistic differences (Çelik, Gümüş, & Gür, 2017; Kaya, 2009, 2015a). For instance, an analysis of several school text books in 2012-2013 academic year demonstrates the they promote an ethno-religious national identity (Cayır, 2014, also see Dogan & Haser, 2014). Despite these assimilationist pressures, the right to education in mother tongue has been expressed by different minorities, particularly by Kurds as the largest ethnic minority group in Turkey (Coskun, Derince & Ucarlar, 2010). There have been some changes with the introduction of language rights to Kurdish minorities in the educational system, which could be considered as a step towards a multicultural education (Çelik, Gümüş, & Gür, 2017). However, the future of these language rights are currently unknown with the escalation of the Kurdish conflict and the end of peace talks, as we will discuss in details in the section on Ethnicity and Educational Inequality.

Increasing privatization of education, struggle and duality in the educational policies between religious and secular poles, along with persistent centralization and monoculturalism inherent in the educational policies, have not helped to improve the quality of education in

Turkey, as we will be discussing in the following sections. Education inequalities based on class, region, sex and ethnic groups have been reproduced. At the same time, performance of Turkey across several countries in tests such as PISA and TMISS has remained well below the average (ERG, 2014).

2.2. Migration & ethnic diversity in Turkey[1]

2.2.1. Migration

Turkey was until recently not considered a country of *im*migration, but rather a country of *e*migration, with large numbers of citizens of Turkey emigrating to West-European countries, in particular after 1960's and 70's to fill up the European shortage of workforce. By the early 2000s, there were more than 3 million Turkish citizens in Europe (İçduygu, 2004). This emigration movement explains the existence of the large literature on Turks living in various European countries and Turkish pupils in European schools (e.g. Agirdag, 2010; Stevens, 2008).

The recent Syrian civil war fundamentally changed this picture with large number of Syrian refugees settling in Turkey. According to the UN Refugee Agency, on 8 December 2016 there were 2,791,250 Syrian refugees registered in Turkey. 36.7% of the registered refugees are school-aged children (UNHCR, 2016). Currently, these refugee children and their families face many challenges at school and their integration into the education system does not go straightforward (Seker & Sirkeci, 2015).

In contrast with cross-border migration, Turkey is a country that has experienced an intense degree of both rural-to-urban and inter-regional *internal* migration. Many poor internal migrants tend to settle in the so-called *gecekondu* areas in inner-city neighborhoods. This internal migration move partly overlaps with ethnic differences, as many of the internal

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[1] In Turkey, as it will be explained in details throughout the chapter, it is not possible to find official statistics about the size of different ethnic and religious minorities. The population census does not ask questions about ethnicity, religion or denomination.

immigrants coming from the eastern parts of the country are ethnic Kurds, as we explain in details in the next section. Schools in the urban internal immigration areas are impacted by this unplanned internal migration. Many of them face poor school quality, low academic achievement of students, intercultural issues related to the ethnically diverse student bodies (Akar, 2010).

2.2.1. *Ethnicity*

As noted in the introduction section, ethnic differences were a taboo topic in Turkey until recently, considered a sensitive subject, and it is still a taboo topic to some extent, even in academic circles (Somer, 2002). The last time that national data on ethnicity were collected was in 1965, in the Population Census, that included a question on mother tongue (Koc, Hancioglu, Cavlin, 2008). As such, currently, there are no official statistics on ethnicity, and according to article 66 of the Turkish Constitution "*anyone who is bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship*" is a Turk. As such, it is not easy to find reliable data on the ethnic mix of the population. However, there are different estimates, and they point at the same direction. Data from the 2003 Turkish Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS)[2] estimate that 83% of the population of Turkey are Turkish-speaking, 14% are Kurdish-speaking, 2% are Arabic-speaking and the remaining 1% belong to other language groups. Although there has been a massive movement of the Kurdish population towards the western and southern provinces of Turkey due to internal migration, still a great majority of the Kurdish population (69%) live in the eastern part of the county. Analysis with the TDHS-data

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[2] Turkish Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS), conducted every 5 years by the Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies, is a nationally representative survey and it is one of the largest datasets available to study social disparities in educational outcomes, although the main focus of this survey is on reproductive health. Moreover, it does not directly ask ethnicity, however questions regarding language spoken at home and the language of the survey can be used to determine linguistic minorities. More information about these surveys can be found in their reports:
http://www.hips.hacettepe.edu.tr/eng/population_survey.shtml

also shows that despite intensive internal migration movements in the last 50 years, large inequalities exist between Turkish and Kurdish-speaking populations, both in the East and west of the country, and that there is almost no convergence between both groups, as we discuss in more detail in the section on Ethnicity and Educational Inequality in Turkey (Koc, Hancioglu, Cavlin, 2008).

Moreover, it is necessary to note that since the foundation of the Republic and based on the Treaty of Lausanne only certain religious minority groups have been considered legally-accepted minorities in Turkey. Historically, therefore, the right to receive an education in one's mother tongue, other than Turkish, was only allowed for Armenian, Greek and Jewish minorities of Turkey, who make up less than 1% of the current population (Kaya, 2009, 2015b). There are also historically private "foreign" schools, such as German, French and American schools. These are owned and managed by non-Turkish citizens. Moreover, there are private or public schools and universities to teach in languages such as English, French, German and Italian, while Kurds, as one of the largest ethnic minority in Turkey, and many other minorities, have long been not entitled to open or manage schools teaching in their mother tongues (Kaya, 2009).

3. Methods

Our review focused on the published, peer-reviewed studies and official reports that focused on the relationship between ethnicity and educational outcomes in Turkey. To assure the quality of the discussed studies, different processes of sampling were used. First, we searched through specific Turkish database, ULAKBIM (i.e. the National Academic Network and Information Center), the Turkish Social Science Citation Index and theses since 1980 for the keywords: educational system, school success, university entrance exam with minority, immigrant, Kurd, region, East. It should be noted that there was not a single article about the

educational success of Kurds, immigrants or minorities (which reflects the above described sociopolitical situation in which ethnic difference remains a 'sensitive' topic) and there were only three theses, two on immigrants and one about the Kurdish minorities . Second, we searched through international bibliographical databases Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) and Ebscohost for the period between 1980-2017 for the keywords: Kurd, Turkey, education, school enrollment, school, performance, and achievement, Minority, Turkish Demographic and Health Survey. This resulted in various studies that focused on Turkish minorities living abroad. However, we excluded these studies, as the focus of this review is on Turkey. Third, a recently published special issue of *Comparative Education* that focused on recent developments the Turkish educational system was used as a central publication (see Altinyelken, Çayır & Agirdag, 2015). The different contributions in this special issue were taken as a starting point to further draw a snowball sample studies on the topic of ethnicity and educational inequality in Turkey.

Applying this sampling frame, we distinguished the following research traditions: studies focusing (1) on regional differences, (2) on linguistic differences and (3) on religious differences. These research traditions are explored in the next paragraphs. Additionally, we did few primary analyses with the PISA 2015 data.

4. Ethnicity and educational inequality in Turkey

4.1. Regional differences

Ethnicity and ethnic inequalities have been a taboo topic in public discourse in Turkey. Still, a political arithmetic tradition that relies on large-scale reports of educational outcomes without giving much theoretical background (Stevens, 2007) can be distinguished. From this perspective, reports and official statistics from the MoNE (Ministry of National Education), national central selection/placement exams, and recently from international assessments such

as PISA have been used to explore social disparities in education. However, the focus has been mainly on 'regional' differences rather than ethnic differences. The focus on regional disparities is informative as earlier research shows the different ethnic structures of Turkey's administrative regions (Icduygu, Romano, & Sirkeci, 1999). An analysis of Demographic and Health Survey in 1993 and 1998 (Kırdar, 2009) for instance, shows that around 70% of Kurdish children, 35% of Arabic children and only 10% of Turkish children reside in the Eastern Anatolia and Southeastern Anatolia regions.

School enrollment varies significantly across regions (MoNE, 2013). According to the data by MONE (2014, 2015), the net enrollment rates in lower secondary education in the year 2013/2014 and in the year 2014-2015 were around 85% in the eastern cities of Hakkari and Van compared to 96% in the western cities of İzmir, Kocaeli and Manisa. The differences are even higher in the enrollment rates in high school with around 86% in the same western cities and 58% in the same eastern cities. The highest rates of enrollment in high school are around 95% in western provinces of Eskişehir, Bolu, Isparta and the lowest rates are around 47% in eastern provinces of Muş and Ağrı. The cities in the Black Sea Region such as Rize, Trabzon, Amasya are also doing well with more than 90% enrollment rates (MONE, 2015).

These results are in line with the results of national selection exams, such as the secondary school selection and university entrance exams (Berberoğlu & Kalender, 2005; Sarier, 2010). Students in the two eastern regions are significantly less successful in nationwide university entrance exams compared to all the other regions (Şahin & Gülmez, 2000; Çetingül & Dülger, 2006). A study by Şahin, Özdemir and Selvi (2012) comparing regional disparities in university entrance exams from 2003 to 2010 not only confirms the regional gap between the two eastern regions and the western regions but also shows that regional disparities increased from 2003 to 2010. Similar regional differences also exist in rates of absenteeism, drop-out, grade-retention (MoNE, 2013).

Regional disparities have also been noted in international assessments such as PISA and TIMMS. For instance, Gümüs and Atalmıs (2012) investigated the achievement gaps between students who reside in different regions in Turkey in PISA assessments of 2003 and 2009. They found that while Marmara, Aegean, and Central Anatolia regions had the highest average scores in these assessments, two eastern regions, Eastern Anatolia and Southeastern Anatolia, had the lowest average scores. While regional differences in student achievement decreased from 2003 to 2009 PISA scores, the gaps have not completely disappeared. Moreover, the students' math achievements in Eastern Anatolia and in Southeastern Anatolia were statistically lower than all other regions not only in PISA 2003 but also in PISA 2009 (for PISA 2006, see Alacacı & Erbaş, 2010; for TIMSS 2007, see Erberber, 2009; for TIMSS 2011, see ERG, 2014).

To sum up, several studies across time using several measures of educational success confirm the existence of regional disparities between the western and eastern regions of Turkey where the large majority of the population are from Kurdish decent (Oyvat & Tekgüç, 2017). Although looking at regional disparities is somehow informative, regional disparities co-vary with disparities in socioeconomic and language background (ERG, 2014). Eastern regions are underdeveloped socio-economically. These provinces receive less spending per student compared to the students in the other provinces (Alacacı & Erbaş, 2010; MoNE, 2013). Particularly the southeastern region is also disadvantaged in terms of class size (38 in the Southeast region vs. 31 average in Turkey), student per teacher rates (21 in the Southeast region vs. 16 average in Turkey) and the percent of inexperienced teachers (up to 90% in some cities) (MoNE, 2013). As for language background, the very large majority of non-Turkish speaking individuals are Kurdish and Arabic women, who live in Eastern regions of Turkey. The data indicate that of the married women aged 15–49 in Turkey, about 4 per cent, or one in 25, is not able to speak Turkish (Smith & Hoşgör, 2003). Therefore, it is hard to

disentangle ethnic, language, socio-economic differences in educational outcomes by only looking at regional differences. The next section focuses on ethnic and language differences in educational outcomes in more detail.

4.2. Linguistic differences

In the absence of direct data about ethnicity, language background could be regarded as a proxy for ethnicity. As such, there are many studies that use language background as an indication of the ethnic background. Kurdish and Arabic minorities have acquired some language rights in education. In 2012 with the 4+4+4 structure in the education system, "Living Languages and Dialects" is defined as one of the electives to be offered as of grade 5. In the 2012-13 academic year, elective courses in the Kurmanji and Zaza dialects of Kurdish, and in the Circassian languages of Adyghe and Abaza, began to be taught (Laz and Georgian courses followed). While 28,587 students took these lessons in 2012-13, and this number increased to 83,344 in 2014-15. These elective courses were mostly offered in the east and southeast cities such as Diyarbakir, Mardin, Batman, Muş (MoNe, 2015, Kaya, 2015b). One of the biggest challenges is finding qualified teachers for these classes, as language and literature departments for ethnic languages are offered in few departments at universities. For instance, Kurdish language and literature department is established only in three universities (out of 179 universities in Turkey). Lack of budget for the preparation of textbooks and course materials for these language courses is another problem. In 2014, this right to mother-tongue education was extended to other minorities so that citizens can found private schools with the aim of providing education in various languages and dialects that they traditionally use in their daily lives. Since then, three private Kurdish primary schools were established, although they were closed down by the state and re-opened several times (Kaya, 2015b). However, current political revival of Turkish nationalism makes the future of these minority language rights are uncertain.

Turkish Demographic and Health Survey (TDHS) of 1993 and 1998 provides information about differences in educational attainment for linguistic minorities (we have not found similar analyses on most recent data, 2013, but see Kusadokoro & Hasegawa, 2017). The data have two language questions that are used to define ethnic minorities: whether the interview is conducted in a different language and whether the mother tongue is different from Turkish. The 1993 survey data revealed that only half of Kurdish participants completed primary school, although primary school education is compulsory. Especially in the southeastern region, almost half of the Kurdish participants received no formal schooling at all (İçduygu et al., 1999). Using the 1998 survey data, Smith and Hosgör (2006) investigate both regional and linguistic differences in primary and secondary school enrollment rates. While in the Western regions, primary school non-enrollment was only a few percent, in the Eastern region, non-enrollment in primary education was still as high as 31.9%. Looking at what distinguishes the children out of school from those who are enrolled, they found that mothers' lack of education, living in the east and mothers' inability to speak Turkish were all influential factors. Similarly, mothers' ability to speak Turkish was found to be an important predictor of school enrollment in 2008 data (Gümüş, 2014)

Using surveys in 1993 and 1998, Kırdar (2009) investigated the reasons for the ethnic gap in enrollment rates as well as those in drop-out. Among the 8-15 years old, Kurdish speaking (29%) and Arabic speaking children (28%) were found to be twice as likely to be not enrolled in school compared ethnic Turkish kids (15%). Looking at the parental education levels, fewer Turkish mothers were illiterate (35%) compared to Kurdish (90%) and Arabic mothers (71%). Similarly, Turkish fathers had longer years of schooling (6.3) compared to Kurdish (3.9) and Arabic fathers (5.1). A combination of regional characteristics (east-west as well as urban-rural), family level characteristics (such as parental education and wealth) and the mother's level of Turkish proficiency all contributed to the ethnic gap in education outcomes.

The gap also varied according to gender such that the gap in non-enrollment rates between Turkish speaking children and minority groups were higher among girls than boys and that the predictors explained away the gap for boys but not for the girls.

There are also few studies using non-representative samples that focus on linguistic differences. One study (Goksen & Cemalcılar, 2010) investigated internal immigration to big cities in Turkey and found that dropouts were more likely to be coming from large households where the main language spoken at home was a language other than Turkish, dropouts' mothers were more likely to be illiterate, and their fathers' were less likely to have stable jobs. Another study (Polat & Shallert, 2013) investigated predictors of native-like Turkish accent among elementary and high school students of Kurdish origin who mainly spoke Kurdish at home. Accordingly, identification with Turkish-speaking community and understanding the importance of learning Turkish as an external motivation predicted more native-like Turkish speaking, while identification with Kurdish speaking community was negatively related to native-like accent. Aksu-Koç, Erguvanlı-Taylan, and Bekman's (2002) study was carried out among primary school children in three big cities (Istanbul, Diyarbakır and Van). The teachers stated that Turkish linguistic skills of students who spoke a first language other than Turkish were very low. Additionally, uneducated mothers and lack of early childhood education services contributed negatively to the level of linguistic development of children (Aksu-Koç et al., 2002).

With the beginning of the new century, Turkey participated on different international studies on student achievement such as PISA and TIMSS. As these data are open to researchers, many researchers started to examine ethnic differences in Turkey through available variables such as language background (e.g. Köseleci, 2015; Ozdemir, 2016). The international TIMSS 2011 data also show that there is a *large* achievement gap in math performance between pupils who speak Turkish at home and those who speak another

language. This achievement gap is visible in all regions of Turkey (ERG, 2014). Our own analyses with the just recently released PISA 2015 data (see Table 1), confirms this. There is a wide gross achievement gap (around half of a standard deviation) between linguistic minorities and pupils who speak Turkish at home, for math, reading and science. After controlling for differences in socioeconomic status (SES), the gap narrows considerably, but the disparity between both groups remains statistically significant.

Table 1: Achievement gap according to home language background in PISA 2015

	Math	**Reading**	**Science**
Gross home language gap	49	43	45
SES controlled home language gap	19	19	17

Note: all differences are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$

To sum up, there is a growing line of research on the ethnic gap in educational outcomes that use linguistic differences to identify different linguistic minority groups, largest being the Kurdish minorities. Using language spoken at home or first language to identify minorities has its own limitations such as failing to include minorities based on other criteria than language or those minorities who cannot or don't prefer to speak another language than Turkish at home. Still, this line of research is important in helping us understand the factors behind disparities in educational outcomes in Turkey. The existing research shows that the intersection of several factors, or rather, cross-cutting disadvantages contribute to the ethnic gap. We still need more research on how regional differences, parental background (Turkish proficiency and years of education), gender and a combination of these factors contribute to the ethnic gap in educational outcomes of linguistic minorities.

4.3. Religious differences

There has been a compulsory religion course in primary and elementary schools since 1983, that mainly teaches the Sunni denomination of Islam—which is the dominant denomination of Islam in Turkey. Only children of legally-accepted religious minorities can be exempted from the course. All others such as Alevi's[3]—a liberal section of Islam—, those from other religions such as Buddhism or atheists and deists are not exempted from this course (Kaya, 2015b). Even then, separating students into those who attend the religious lessons and those who don't may lead to the exposure of non-Muslim children, who may suffer exclusion. Moreover, content analyses of these textbooks suggest that they are one-sided and negative towards other faiths (Çayır, 2014). For instance, expressions such as "our religion" "our holy book Quran" and "our prophet" are used frequently, with the assumption that everyone has the same belief. Other religions and beliefs are judged from a Sunni Islamic perspective and placed in a certain hierarchy (ERG, 2011). Moreover, the centralized exam for entry into secondary school includes questions based on the obligatory religion course, which does create a competitive disadvantage for students exempt from this course (Kaya, 2015b).

Moreover, cases of harassment against minorities (even by teachers), such as letting them sit at the back of the class or name-calling and bulling by other children are prevalent and not governed or punished by the school policies (see Kaya, 2009, 2015b for a report of in-depth interviews with minority members, experts, NGOs, school directors, teachers, students and their parents in several big cities).

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[3] Sunnism is the dominant denomination of Islam endorsed by the majority of the Turkish population. Alevism is a more liberal and left-leaning orientation of Islam endorsed by a minority of the Turkish Population. They are officially considered not as a denomination of Islam but rather as a folkloric tradition in Turkey. However, it should also be noted that no official statistics are kept regarding the size of different groups. The most common estimate of Alevis is around 15%, with a range from 3% (self-identification) to 19% (religiously significant figures measured) (Carkoglu, 2005).

With increasing religiosity in the educational system, religion-based inequalities have also increased. The new elective courses about Islam (Islam) were sometimes the only available choice for students. Moreover, the number of Imam Hatip schools both at the elementary and high school levels have increased by transforming the neighborhood schools into Imam Hatip religious schools. There are concerns that a significant number of poor and disadvantaged children have been forced to study at Imam Hatip schools either because the school in their neighborhood has been transformed into such a school or due to their low score on the high school entrance exam (for instance, Roma children, Kaya, 2015b). As far as we know, there are no data and studies available on the educational enrollment, achievement or attainment disparities between different religious groups.

In sum, there is few research evidence regarding the educational outcomes of religious minorities, even fewer than those focusing on linguistic minorities. The existing research consists of either textbook analyses or the disadvantages created by the centralized curriculum and compulsory religion courses, and few reports exist on the harassment or discrimination faced by these minority groups. Given that official statistics are missing about the largest religious minority group in Turkey, Alevis, it is even harder to study their educational outcomes. Still, this research suggests that the centralized and ethno-religious character of the Turkish education system which promotes Turkish nationalism together with Sunni Islam continues to create disadvantages for these minority groups.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Although the number of studies in Turkey on ethnic differences in education are limited, this review shows that regional and linguistic inequalities are large and do not tend to decrease over the years. A major challenge is the lack of systematic information on the subjective ethnic background, which makes the direct assessment of ethnic differences

difficult. Speaking a different mother tongue is not necessarily an indicator of self-identification and regional differences do not perfectly match with ethnicity either. Moreover, minority groups who do not have a different mother tongue or who live different regions, are almost completely forgotten in the literature. As such, studying and recognizing structural inequalities regarding various minorities of Turkey may help to develop policies to target such inequalities.

The challenges are not only political, but also related to scholarly perspective in the literature. For instance, many studies that point at linguistic or regional differences, interpret the results from a deficit perspective. For instance, linguistic differences are interpreted as 'lack' of cultural capital or linguistic competence, while they fail to take into account the structural problems at the level of national educational policies or fail to focus on the ethnic and religious inequalities (e.g. Akar, 2010; Ince, 2015).

The characteristics of the educational system further complicate the picture. Turkey has one of the most centralized education systems in the world (Gershberg 2005), therefore educational policies are also centralized so that governmental policies shape the legal framework of schooling and the content of curricula and it can even impose the pedagogical orientations that individual schools have to follow. Moreover, central policies not only have an influence on the public sector, but also the private sector is largely dependent on governmental policies. This may explain how and why the education system has been an arena of political struggle between secular and conservative poles in Turkey. Similarly, improvement in Kurdish language rights in education was parallel to the peace process between 2012-2015. Since the process has been halted and the violent armed conflicts have resumed (Yeğen, 2015), the future of those rights remains unclear.

Finally, the recent migration developments, with the influx of almost three million Syrians, remain largely out of the scope of this review as there is currently almost no peer-

reviewed or representative research that focus on this issue. However, we expect that in the coming years an increasing number of studies will investigate the educational integration of these newcomers (but for reports, see Emin, 2016; Unicef, 2017). Among registered school-age Syrian immigrant children, almost 40% is estimated to be out of school (Unicef, 2017). Thus, there are many challenges and unanswered questions facing researchers and policy makers alike. While many Syrian children seem to work in black market to support their families, how will the families be convinced of the necessity to send their children to school? What are the barriers against Syrian children's school enrollment and success? What are the challenges that await teachers and schools with the influx of Syrian students who are not fluent in Turkish? How are teachers' opinions about the growing ethnic and linguistic diversity articulated in their classrooms within the context of growing nationalism? Will the increase of linguistic diversity provide new opportunities for multilingual education? What type of educational or integration policies will promote higher enrollment and lower dropout rates among Syrian children? This might be an opportunity for educational research to address the above mentioned challenges and provide a more complete picture of all ethnic differences in education.

Overall, more research is needed on social disparities in educational outcomes in Turkey. First, we need better official statistics and studies in identifying various ethnic, religious or otherwise minority groups, lifting the taboo around these topics. Knowing the extent of the gaps is the first step to understand the factors behind the (under)achievement of various minority groups in Turkey. This should open up the space for public debate and discussion as well as more integrative and data-driven educational policies. While the educational structure and policies are constantly changing (e.g., 14 major changes in the last 15 years), these changes seem to be not data-driven and rather implemented top-down in favor of one or the other political agenda. We need more and better data to inform policy changes,

not only to understand and equalize the gaps in educational outcomes based on ethnic,

regional, cultural, gender or religious differences within Turkey but also to promote Turkey's

educational outcomes internationally.

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