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Educational decentralization as part of public administration reform in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper will examine current discussions in Turkey centered around the likely decentralization of its educational system as part of ongoing reform efforts in public administration. Ironically, both proponents and opponents of the education decentralization problematize issues related to resource allocation and discrepancies in educational quality and access under the current centralized system. Proponents argue that greater autonomy at the local levels will improve educational quality, enhance stakeholder participation in the administration of the schools, encourage a democratic environment, and create a more responsive and accountable system. Opponents, on the other hand, worry that the primary problem is in fact the state's approach to public education than the actual variations in educational provision. Although it is too early to speculate the model of decentralization that will be selected, issues such as personnel administration, funding of education, and adherence to principles of unity of education and secularism of the existing system remain controversial issues. Further, current concerns pertaining to teacher recruitment practices, private spending on education and inadequate state allocation raises questions about the exact motives for decentralization. Against this backdrop, this paper will examine how a possible decentralization of Turkey’s educational system will impact issues of quality and equity. It will do so by first examining the current decentralization policies being envisioned in Turkey. Following that, it explores selected country cases, which made the transition from a centralized educational structure to a decentralized setting and investigates the demonstrated impact of the switch. Subsequently, given the somewhat similarities between those studied in the paper and Turkey, this paper concludes that in formulating policies, especially those favoring possible decentralization, policymakers must be mindful of the global evidence that is available. Further, given the current challenges facing Turkey, decentralization of the educational sector might actually exacerbate the very issues that proponents of the policy hope would disappear.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, educational decision-making has undergone an evolution (Stromquist, 2002). Countries around the world have introduced numerous educational reforms, some organic while others influenced by external

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guidance. The commonality, however, is that the majority of the reforms are finance-driven and the recurring theme is the need to minimize costs (Stromquist, 2002). Decentralization of education is one such reform, which emerged in the 1980s and today has almost become a global phenomenon. The trigger behind the decision to decentralize has varied between countries. Essentially, however, the issues that prompted its advent in the last few decades coincided with the struggle of socialist states, which led to a decline in confidence about centralized states; the financial recessions of the 80s and 90s that plunged several governments into fiscal pandemonium (Fiske, 1996); the hesitation of international donor agencies to offer loans to countries without them correcting their fiscal imbalances first (Hanson, 1997); and of course the emergence of globalization (Astiz, et al, 2002).

Broadly, the decision to decentralize a country’s education sector has been endorsed on grounds that it will make the system more efficient, effective, and democratic (Gershberg and Winkler, 2004). A decentralized system, according to supporters, would annul the vices of public sector service delivery, namely bureaucracy, administrative inefficiencies, fiscal wastefulness, and initiate a system that results in greater transparency, accountability and responsiveness. However, critics claim that most decentralization decisions are prompted by the intention of redistributing financial responsibility (Hanson, 1997), because central governments, too often, find themselves in immense fiscal debts. Stated or unstated, this is a primary goal seen often in recent years (for example, in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua, and the United States) (Hanson, 1997, p. 5).

2. Emerging Decentralization in Turkey

After the first wave of the economic–financial liberalization, a second wave of reforms emerged in the late 1990s and gradually gained momentum. These reforms targeted the state apparatus (Güler, 2005). Subsequently, with the Justice and Development Party (JDP) coming to power in late 2002, it announced a series of reforms in public administration and local governments, as part of its party program. The party program (JDP, 2001) stated that the Turkish Constitution would recognize the principle of local self-government in accordance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The state, it mentioned, would be responsible for justice, internal and external security, basic education, health, and infrastructure. Further, it was determined that the state would withdraw from the productions of all other goods and services and its role should be one of regulation and inspection in remaining areas (2002). Eventually, in 2003, the National Program for the Adoption of Acquis stated that reductions in the role of the public sector through privatization would become a major priority.

In keeping with the “good governance” agenda adopted by the party, and the envisioned changes in center-local relations within the scope of public administration reform, the 58th government program (2002) included concomitant reforms for the education sector. As a result, the Ministry of National Education (MONE) would be given a coordinating role, while local governments, civil society, and the private sector would be assigned a greater role in educational policy making and service provision. Additionally, the Urgent Action Plan (2002), adopted by the 58th and 59th governments, envisioned that educational services would be provided at provincial level and local branches of MoNE (provincial and sub-provincial directorates) would be handed over to Provincial Special Administrations, organizations of central administration at the provincial level. While these bodies would be responsible for personnel and resources, curriculum control and supervision would continue to be centralized.

Against this backdrop, efforts to restructure public administration in Turkey accelerated beginning 2003. As a major step in this direction, the draft law on Basic Principles of Public Administration provided the framework for the reorganization of the public administration. The first draft mentioned educational decentralization, as a part of the Public Administration Reform. However, public pressure forced drafters to eliminate sections that called for educational restructuring. Discussions regarding the projected change in organizational structure had primarily entailed assigning the Special Province Administrations’ institutional and financial capacities the new responsibility of education delivery. Denouncing this move, critics questioned why local branches of MoNE were instead not entrusted with more responsibility? Additionally, criticisms were also directed at the lack of a gradual switchover. Considering the provisions of the draft law that paved the way for outsourcing provision of educational services, they argued that local bodies would remain incapable of providing education in the midst of cost reductions, which would eventually force a privatization regime on educational delivery (Keskin, 2003; Soydan, 2006).
2.1. Current Status

In the recent past, Turkey has seen myriad legislations, within the scope of local administration reform including Municipalities, Metropolitan Municipalities, Special Provincial Administrations, Unions of Local Authorities, Law on Public Financial Management and Control and Law on Share Given to Special Provincial Administration and Municipalities from General Budget Tax Revenues being adopted. However, the Draft Law on Basic Principles of Public Administration, which restructures the relation between the center and local bodies, is yet to become a law. Policy makers have instead chosen to implement certain provisions of the law in an incremental manner. The enactment of regulations on decentralization without the complete adoption of the framework law on public administration has led to challenges (Keleş, 2009).

Currently, studies have been focused on restructuring efforts at central government and its constituent parts and amendment of establishment laws of public institutions. However, according to SIGMA, constitutionality of draft law on organizational structures seems problematic (2008). Reports suggest that constitutional reform remains an important challenge for further progress in restructuring administration and decentralization/de-concentration of public services (SIGMA, 2008). In the recent past, the Constitutional Court rejected the provision of new Municipality law that allowed municipalities to open pre-schools on the grounds that education is considered as a state prerogative according to constitution (dated 24.1.2007 Cardinal numbered 2005/95 and Verdict numbered 2007/5). Difficulties experienced with the intended regulations in other fields of public administration such as social security and state personnel regime because of the conflicts with the constitutional provisions regarding public service and public employees (Bagimsiz Sosyal Bilimciler, 2008). In education, legal struggles of teacher unions have been going on for a while and numerous lawsuits have been filed against the flexible employment practices of the government. In fact, work on constitutional change already started. Government appointed a commission to draft constitution but the new draft constitution presented in 2007 was later shelved. Considering the current amendments to the Constitution, according to SIGMA, government appeared to proceed with changes in a piecemeal fashion (SIGMA, 2008). However debates over new constitution continue to grow in intensity.

In spite of the existing constitutional and political challenges, reform efforts supported by the European Union and World Bank continue to proceed in the direction of decentralization of the Turkish educational system. In fact, ongoing European Commission projects and funds have been made available to decentralize vocational education and training system and restructure the MoNE. Simultaneously, efforts to improve monitoring and control capacity of MoNE have also been strengthened, as part of the decentralization strategy. To address quality problem in schools, introduction of competition among public schools and accountability oriented standardized testing are among the foreseen changes (World Bank, 2008). Although the scope and extent of projected decentralization is not clear yet, it is understood from the ministry officials’ explanations and ongoing project documents that deconcentration through shifting responsibility from central government to provincial field units and individual schools is increasingly being considered as a decentralization strategy (European Commission, 2006; MoNE, 2009). It is, however, also unclear whether additional decisions in favor of decentralization will be pursued in the longer run. It is hoped that a clearer picture will emerge after the results from the ongoing EU-sponsored study, titled “Capacity Building Support for the MoNE” project and the promulgation of the 2010-2014 Strategic Plan of MoNE expected to address details associated with the envisioned decentralization (ERG, 2009a).

2.2. World Scenario

Beginning with the 80s, decentralization in education has gained in momentum around the world. Several countries have attempted to decentralize parts of its educational sector at the state, province or local level. In general, the trend until now is that developing countries are more likely to decentralize the finance of government services than developed nations. In 1979, the Nigerian Constitution ended significant central funding for primary education and made it a local responsibility. That was reversed in the 80s and 90s, when the military tried to re-centralize the system, which actually increased an already heavy fiscal deficit triggered by falling oil prices. Thus, in 1988, the central government created the National Primary Education Commission, which established the sharing of financial responsibility between the center, state and local governments. By 1991, however, the local governments had once again been entrusted with the entire responsibility of primary education (Gershberg and Winkler, 2004).

Argentina decentralized her primary and secondary education to the provincial governments at a time when the country was undergoing extreme financial crisis. The center transferred educational financial responsibility to the provinces because the country was dealing with a huge financial deficit (Sissoko, 2005). First, the total financial
responsibility for primary education was shifted to the provinces in 1978, and followed that up with a co-financing strategy for secondary education in the 90s. In quite the same way, Colombia instituted a financial decentralization policy in which the center continued to transfer funds to the regions and municipalities, but the regions and municipalities themselves would fund any form of expansion.

Brazil introduced a form of decentralization where officials comprising teachers, parents, and students above the age of 16 were appointed to set up a school board, which was entrusted greater financial, administrative, and pedagogical autonomy. While the school received a grant based on enrollment, the boards had the liberty to decide spending and generate further revenues locally.

In 1980, the military government in Chile initiated dramatic reforms in the educational sector, which led to a simultaneous process of municipalization and privatization. While through the former, decisions regarding school expenditure were decentralized to the municipal level, the latter introduced a voucher system, which allowed both private and public schools to compete for the same student base. As a result, school revenues were determined on a “month-to-month basis by total enrollments and a government-determined voucher. Teachers lost their status as civil servants, reverting to municipal contracts, and school buildings and land were signed over to municipal control” (Carnoy and McEwan, 2003, p. 3). The vouchers in Chile ushered in a system where public money could be used to support private schools.

Interestingly, the recent past has been witness to the rising phenomenon of privatization in the educational sector. The move entails the use of private money to fund public education Examples of this include “parents voluntarily or involuntarily paying matriculation fees for admission to public schools; parents paying special fees for their children to participate in extracurricular activities, such as band or football; real-estate developers paying a special fee for each new house constructed to go for new school construction; the community paying the salaries of teachers for government-constructed schools (or vice versa); and proceeds from the school snack shop or parent fund-raising activities being used to support the public school” (Hanson, 1997, p.12).

2.3. Demonstrated Impact

Perhaps the biggest concern about financial decentralization is its impact on equity. Some analysts believe that financial decentralization is justifiable on the grounds that local authorities, once entrusted with the responsibility of spending or generating revenues, would take greater care in how the money is spent (Hanson, 1997). However, the counter claim to that is, financial decentralization widens already existing inequalities between regions. The widening of the gap not only manifests in resource mobilization but also ultimately in the quality of education imparted to the students. As a result, most often what we evidence is an increase in the gap between the rich and poor; with some areas having more financial and human resources than others and thereby making the maximum use of decentralized power (Fiske, 1996). The abundance in financial resource further translates into better teacher pay, better educational inputs, and better per capita student expenditure.

The evidence from the various decentralization attempts around the world is mixed so far. Fiske, references Prawda’s (1993a) research, which found positive outcomes in Mexico and Argentina, where regional differences in preschool and primary coverage, repetition and dropout rates, and primary-completion rates narrowed with decentralization (1996). Prawda asserts that decentralization also led to better resource management, and authorities responded well to local requirements. However, Dr. Adriana Puiggros, a professor of the History of Argentine and Latin American Education at the University of Buenos Aires, asserted that decentralization did away with some very crucial mainstays of the previously centralized system – namely, state-sponsored programs that had earlier provided educational inputs (books, and supplies) were terminated. Teacher salaries also underwent dramatic cuts during this phase (Du, 2002). Further, schools that were underfinanced soon faced problems of overcrowding and inadequate infrastructure. Stating facts, Puiggros mentioned that due to financial constraints, approximately 46 percent of teachers ended up with more than 500 students in their classes, while 18 percent had to cater to more than 1,000 students in class (Du, 2002).

Perhaps the strongest criticism against financial decentralization is that it increases disparities between rich and poor localities. If local governments are free, to supplement central government funding for education with additional resources through increased taxes, regions that have low fiscal capacity will not be able to generate adequate resources to provide the quantity and quality of education provided earlier (Winkler, 1993). This has especially been true in Chile. Carnoy (1998), states that the municipalization and privatization of education in Chile led to a decline in total educational spending. Between 1985 and 1990, federal contributions to the educational sector declined from 5.3 percent of GNP to 3.7 percent of GNP. While the decline coincided with an increase in
municipal and private spending, local financial mobilization was not fast enough to offset the heavy decreases in government spending. In effect however, the decline in federal spending resulted in wider disparities between rich and poor municipalities. Schools residing in rich municipalities could afford to generate substantial resources through private spending, while those on the other side of the spectrum remained limited by the lack of adequate resources. In such situations, there needs to be a stronger role for the center in equalizing fiscal capacity, otherwise gaps will only widen (Winkler, 1993).

Critics also argue that an apprehension surrounding financial decentralization is that if local authorities are entrusted with the responsibility of managing and spending educational funds, they might be more prone to exhausting available resources to meet short-term goals than directing it toward education, where gains are not immediate (Fiske, 1996). The problem is especially accentuated during moments of economic crisis, when local governments are left with the arduous task of redistributing resources between different sectors.

2.4. Concerns in Turkey

Traditionally concerns about education decentralization has been emanating from the existence of separatist and religious movements in the country considered to be a threat to the unified education system based on the principle of secularism. Although the restructuring process under the globalization and localization forces aggravated these concerns, the current discussions are somewhat different from those of the past in terms of their emphasis on the finance of educational provision.

Contemporary critics of educational decentralization in Turkey, view the move as part of a comprehensive public administration reform strategy, encompassing organizational, financial and personnel facets, and not simply an isolated reform move. It must also be remembered, that although the need for reforms in educational administration, especially along the lines of personnel regime and local administrations, was widely admitted (Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2004), today, debates and tensions have emerged with respect to the nature of the envisioned reforms and what the social consequences of such a restructuring process might be. Accordingly, parallel concerns such as the changing role of the state as a policy maker, as the provider and purchaser of public services and as an employer; adoption of New Public Management techniques (adoption of client-centered and output-oriented perspective) and the role of the external actors in the reform processes are expressed in response to both ongoing reform efforts in education and the other fields of public-service provision (Aydoğanoğlu, 2006; Bayramoğlu, 2004; Çınar, 2005; Güler, 2005; Keskin, 2003; Özdoğan, 2004; Soydan, 2006; Uluğ, 2004; Yılmaz, 2004; Zengin, 2005).

Prior to introducing any reform in Turkey, the present condition of education must be remembered. Double shifting, over crowded classrooms, multi grade teaching, lack of adequate infrastructure, educational equipment and material needs, personnel and auxiliary staff shortages, inadequate support for professional development of educational personnel (Egitim Sen, 2009a; MoNE, 2008), significant number of primary school-age children out of school, low enrollment rates after primary cycle (ERG, 2009a), inequalities in access to education based on income level, regional socio-economic structure and gender (Bakış, Levent, İnsl & Polat, 2009), existence of socio-economically stratified public schools (Diniçer & Kolaşin, 2009), excessive expansion of private tutoring (Egitim Sen, 2009a) and psychological and economic burden of exam-centered system on families and students (SPO, 2006; World Bank, 2005) are among some of the current problems in Turkish education. Aggravating these problems further is the reality of the low shares of GDP that education has attracted for years. Additionally, the steady decline in investment expenditures (4.57% of the 2009 MoNE budget) and sustained budget shortages have led to serious concerns about quality and access issues in education (Egitim Sen, 2009a).

Ironically, both opponents and proponents of the education decentralization problematize issues related to resource allocation and discrepancies in educational quality and access under the current centralized system (World Bank, 2005). Proponents argue that greater autonomy at the local levels will improve educational quality, enhance stakeholder participation in the management of the schools, encourage a democratic environment, and create a more responsive and accountable system. Whereas, according to the opponents main problem is with the state's approach

Although 47% of the population is 25 years old or under in the country, total educational expenditures accounted for about 3.1% of GDP which is well below both the OECD average of 5.5% and UNESCO benchmark of 6% set for developing countries (ERG, 2009b). Besides, in spite of the envisioned goal of expanding preschool education and existing infrastructural needs as a result of the recently increased duration of secondary education to four years, further decrease in budget allocation for the 2010-2012 triennium has been projected (ERG, 2009a).
to public education rather than the variations in levels of educational provision. Accordingly, arguments against education decentralization in Turkey, claim that it will result in further privatization of public education and deepen existing inequalities under centralized system. Underlying these concerns is the belief that the major motive of reform is to relieve the central government of its administrative and financial burden. Instead of increasing public spending, ongoing and proposed policies in the direction of privatization were suggested to confirm these arguments (Keskin, 2003; Soydan, 2006). Noteworthy among these policies and practices are de facto cost-sharing in constitutionally free public schools; widespread practice of alternative revenue generation in public schools with budget shortfalls; state support for private education through direct public funding of private institutions or incentive credits and exemption from corporation and income taxes; various forms of corporate involvement in schools; reduction in the cost of labor though flexible employment schemes and salary repression policy; downsizing auxiliary staff or outsourcing related services in public schools and efforts to introduce tuition vouchers and public-private partnerships for school construction (Akça, 2002; Eğitim Sen, 2009b; Gök, 2004; Güler, 2005; Gür, 2006; Keskin & Demirci, 2003; Kilincalp, 2007; Soydan, 2006; Türk Eğitim Sen, 2009; Özturk, 2002; Zoraloğlu et al. 2005).

3. Conclusion

Although it is too early to speculate the model of decentralization that will be chosen, recent developments indicates that at least further financial decentralization and central control of the curriculum through external examinations can be expected. One of the stated intentions of the reform is the introduction of competition among schools. It is not clear for now what kind of mechanisms will be developed to promote competition. However, considering the envisioned performance-based educational system, it is clear that performance indicators by themselves will not create accountability. Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect introduction of mechanisms to reward or penalize individual or institutional performance outcomes which can have implications for personnel administration and education funding policies.

Given the overarching responsibility of instituting fiscal discipline (Boratav, 2009; NPAA, 2008), it would seem that increases in government spending in education maybe hard to come by. Quite obviously, the decreases in government spending may have to be offset by increases in private contributions. In fact, the government has already stated that saving and efficiency in public spending, as part of public administration reform would be priority (NPAA, 2008). In this sense, considering the broad context of reform; ongoing pressures of international finance institutions to depress personnel expenditures and civil service reform agenda expected to bring removal of job security for the majority of public employees and flexible employment and the provisions of newly enacted laws that paved the way for privatization of public services, examined concerns that emphasize financial motives behind decentralization rather than espoused ones seem reasonable.

Although educational decentralization has been attempted by several countries, the evidence to date is inconclusive and inconsistent about its impact on quality, fairness or efficiency in educational provision (Fiske, 1996; Winkler & Yeo, 2007). On the contrary, finance driven decentralization efforts which has been common in the developing countries suggest consistently disappointing results (Carnoy, 2000). As seen in reforms in traditionally centralized systems of Latin American Countries, decentralization in response to fiscal constraints commonly introduced with market mechanisms deteriorates the educational provision and quality and exacerbates inequality (Arnove & Torres, 2007).

To date, increasing the share of private education at all levels of education and utilizing cost recovery mechanisms to overcome budgetary constraints has long been proposed by several country development plans and adopted by successive governments in Turkey (Soydan, 2006). However, it is widely held conviction that deterioration in the quality of public school education and privatization is closely associated (Bakış et al., Eğitim Sen, 2009; Gök, 2004). In this sense, failure to pay attention to the trends in other developing countries and the domestic concerns about the possible impact of further financial decentralization, which is considered as promoted by the sole motive of contributing economic stability, may have detrimental and irreversible effects on educational system.

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3 The most recent OECD data indicate that central government expenditure as a percentage of total expenditure is 55%, whereas this rate is 39% for household expenditures (Eğitim Sen, 2009). On average across OECD countries, the share of spending on education comes from private sources is 12% (ERG, 2009a).
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