

RELIGION AND SCHOOLING IN TURKEY: THE NEED FOR REFORM



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Education Reform Initiative (ERI), is a project launched within the Istanbul Policy Center at Sabancı University to improve education policy and decision making through research, advocacy and monitoring. ERI is committed to quality education for all.

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INTRODUCTION

The Education Reform Initiative (ERI) initiated a series of meetings between May 2004 and February 2005 on "religion and schooling" in order to discuss the increasing need for reform in this area through a participatory process involving relevant stakeholders. This dialogue aimed at developing a consensus on new policy options in religion and education.

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORK^{1,2}

Policy issues, solutions and practices in religion and schooling vary in Europe and throughout the world. UNESCO findings published in 2003 showed that out of 142 countries surveyed, religious education appears as a compulsory subject in around half - 73 of them- on at least one occasion during a pupil's first nine years of schooling.

In spite of the existing differences among many European countries, there are also significant similarities. In many countries, there are either compulsory or elective courses about religion and education. For instance, confessional religious education in public schools is compulsory in Austria, Cyprus, Greece and Ireland, and optional in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. Sweden, Denmark, and England have compulsory non-confessional religious education in schools. Albania, France, Serbia and Montenegro do not hold distinct religious classes; instead they provide information about religions as part of other courses. The increasing diversity of these societies in terms of faith, values, lifestyles and the resulting pluralism has brought the question of what kind of education policies to pursue when dealing with the issue of religion and schooling.

Much of public dialogue centers on interpreting the rights, defining roles of the state, public and private educational institutions and religious organizations. Public policy debate is influenced by international conventions, legal precedents and processes, and political theories or agendas.

In addition to the continuing discussions at the national level, a number of international organizations have begun to deepen discussions on religion and schooling with new perspectives. The publication by UNESCO's International Commission on Education for the 21st Century, "Learning: The Treasure Within", calls attention to the cultural and spiritual levels of education. In November 2001, UN held a conference in Spain on the "Elimination of Religious Discrimination and Intolerance in Education" in order to tackle religious intolerance and develop strategies on freedom of faith and thought. The conference proceedings called for strengthening the human rights education and increasing the worldviews and understanding of others. The subsequent Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief has taken on the role of making policy recommendations to implement the decisions of the UN conference.

Global developments have also influenced the European Commission's strategies in devising a more proactive, multicultural approach regarding the issue of religion and schooling. The

1. Kızılca Yürür, Avrupa Birliği'ne bağlı ülkelerin ilk, orta okul ve lise seviyesindeki okullarında din dersi eğitimi (İstanbul: Eğitim Reformu Girişimi, 2004).

2. Zdenko Kodelja and Terrice Bassler, Religion and Schooling in Open Society: A Framework for Informed Dialogue (Ljubljana, Slovenia: Open Society Institute, December 2004).

European Parliament has made some suggestions within the framework of “Recommendations on Religion and Democracy” in 1999. According to the recommendation, “education is the key way to combat ignorance and stereotypes. School and university curricula should be revised, as a matter of urgency, so as to promote better understanding of the various religions; religious instruction should not be given at the expense of lessons about religions as an essential part of the history, culture and philosophy of humankind.”

THE EMERGING NEED FOR REFORM

Article 24 of the 1982 Turkish Constitution states that “... Religious Culture and Moral Education is included within the compulsory curriculum of the elementary and secondary education.” Article 12 of the Basic Law of National Education, which was revised in line with the new constitution, states that “Turkish education is secular. Religious Culture and Moral Education is included within the compulsory curriculum of the elementary and secondary education.”

The curricula of courses on Religious Culture and Moral Education, which are developed by the Board of Education, include memorization of prayers and teaching of religious practices. The curricula require students at the 4th grade to memorize prayers and at the 6th grade to perform daily prayers. Thus, it can be concluded that confessional religious instruction is being conducted within the compulsory courses on Religious Culture and Moral Education

However, Article 2 of the 1982 and 1961 Constitutions clearly state that “Republic of Turkey is ... a democratic, secular and social state based on the rule of law.” With respect to Article 2 and 24 of the 1982 Constitution, it is apparent that teaching of Religious Culture and Moral Education by the secular state cannot be oriented towards imposing certain religious beliefs and convictions. In addition, the reference to “religious beliefs and convictions” in Article 24 asserts that religious disbelief is as acceptable as religious belief. Within this perspective, teaching of Religious Culture and Moral Education in the form of ‘teaching about religion’ rather than ‘teaching religion’ is in line with the spirit of the Constitution. The statement of ‘culture of religion’ itself excludes imposing a religion or sect.

An instruction including comparative and descriptive study of different religions and belief systems is therefore appropriate to the spirit and premises of the Constitution. This approach will of course embrace a strong historical perspective with a range of different religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) and belief systems (Buddhism, Hinduism, etc). This will also bring about issues like sociology of religion and economics of religion. Different sets of moral values and understanding will be taught in a historical as well as a comparative perspective. This would enable students to enrich their knowledge and a multicultural understanding that would enhance their tolerance and positive attitude towards people with different backgrounds.

PUBLIC DEBATES IN TURKEY

Lately, as in many countries, the issue of religion and schooling has become part of the political agenda in Turkey. The democratization process, which dates back to the mid 1990's and which has gained momentum through the European Union accession process, has also been one of the key driving factors behind the public debates on "religion and schooling."

The discussions today have been carried out in two spheres. The first concerns an attempt of the Board of Education to revise the curriculum of the course on Religious Culture and Moral Education. The other is the application of a Turkish citizen to the European Court of Human Rights for the removal of the compulsory course on religions from the national curriculum.

The thinking process launched by the Education Reform Initiative aims to formulate the need for reform in religion and schooling through a participatory process with different stakeholders.

Attached you will find the principles and policy recommendations that emerged from these discussions and were made available to the public on March 1st, 2005.

RELIGIOUS CULTURE AND MORAL EDUCATION: COMMON PRINCIPLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS: ARTICLE 13/1

The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. They further agree that education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

EUROPEAN CONVENTION ON HUMAN RIGHTS: FIRST PROTOCOL, ARTICLE 2

No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.

In view of the international conventions that Turkey ratified, the declaration of the Oslo Coalition following the Global Meeting of Experts in September 2004,³ other relevant materials examined and the opinions of those who contributed:

Consensus has been reached on the following principles and recommendation as regards the reform needed in religion and schooling at primary and secondary levels.

1. Education in Turkey should:
 - Promote
 - respect for Human Rights (HR), in particular Freedom of Religion or Belief (FRB)
 - tolerance in relation to religion or belief
 - respect for plurality of religions, opinions and belief
 - cross-cultural and inter-faith understanding and respect
 - Combat
 - discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief
 - stereotypes and prejudices based on religion or belief
 - Emphasize
 - that respect for HR and FRB are preconditions for protecting equal human dignity and for peaceful co-existence in pluralistic societies
 - Secure
 - the right not to receive religious instruction / education inconsistent with one's own conviction

3. The Oslo Global Meeting of Experts, September 2nd – 5th 2004, Conclusions and Recommendations From the Participants (<http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/OsloCoalition/Report0904.doc>).

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2. Within this framework, the existing compulsory course on Religious Culture and Moral Education in schools should be based on a secular understanding that promotes neutrality between the state and every other religion and sect.
 3. In view of this, all Turkish citizens should acquire the basic information about religion, its history, belief systems, culture, language, basic practices and moral values and its contribution to literature and art. In addition, general information about all religions should be taught so that children can become acquainted with different belief systems and conduct relations with people from different religious backgrounds.
 4. Accordingly, the curriculum of the compulsory courses on Religious Culture and Moral Education in primary and secondary education should not impose particular belief systems on students and/or aim at changing their religious beliefs. On the contrary, the compulsory course should be non-confessional and advance learning about religions. To enable this, confessional subjects should be taken out of the existing curriculum and be replaced with information about history and culture of religions, moral values, philosophy, art and general basic knowledge about all belief systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

In line with the above - mentioned principles:

1. Within the general framework of the curriculum reform undertaken by the Board of Education in Turkey, experts should develop a new curriculum for the compulsory course on Religious Culture and Moral Education through a participatory approach reflecting the religious pluralism in Turkey.
2. Teachers who will be responsible for the instruction of the new curriculum on Religious Culture and Moral Education should be given in-service training that will equip them with the necessary attitudes and skills to implement the curriculum properly.
3. Monitoring and support mechanisms necessary for the successful implementation of the new curriculum should be constructed.
4. In addition, the demands of families for confessional religious education in line with their own religious beliefs were taken into consideration and discussed throughout the meetings. Following these discussions, consensus was reached on the following principles and recommendations:
 - Confessional religious education should be optional. It should not be taught as a compulsory or elective course and be only available upon request of families.
 - Optional confessional courses should be organized within the framework of formal education.
 - The content of the optional confessional course should be developed such that it will not conflict with the content and philosophy of the non-confessional course on Religious Culture and Moral Education.
 - Optional confessional courses should be taught by teachers, possessing a university degree and pedagogic formation and able to teach in line with the principles outlined above.
 - The salary of teachers who will be teaching optional confessional courses should not be allocated from the state budget.
 - There have been different recommendations on how and where to conduct the optional confessional courses. These different views include formal education institutes, summer courses, community education centers or TV programs. Discussions have brought about many advantages and disadvantages of the numerous proposals. These should be discussed by experts in a participatory manner and subsequent policies that are acceptable, applicable and sustainable should be formulated.

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