

Ecem Karlıdağ-Dennis, Institute for Social Innovation and Impact, University of Northampton, Northampton, UK*

Zeynep Temiz, Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Karamanoglu Mehmetbey University, Karaman, Turkey

Firdevs Melis Cin, Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Corresponding Author: Ecem Karlıdağ-Dennis, ecem.karlidag-dennis@northampton.ac.uk

Hegemony and the Neoconservative Politics of Early Education Policymaking

Abstract:

This research explores the dynamics, actors, and political authority through which early education policymaking is formulated and negotiated using a Gramscian perspective. Drawing on interviews with teachers, teacher trainers, and parents, we argue that educational landscape in Turkey is driven by a prevailing neoconservative and hegemonic agenda and is mediated by a domestic history and politics that produce a monolithic understanding. We first present the political mediations that shape the interplay between the conservative ideology of the care and childcare market and then tease out the complexities of the top-down policymaking approach that leaves little room for deliberation with civil society and various educational stakeholders. We conclude the paper by discussing the initiatives launched that allow social access and opportunities in early education along with the implications of how and why ‘early education policy’ seems to be trapped between discourses of the raw childcare market and neoconservative gender essentialism.

Key words: policymaking, early education, hegemony, Gramsci, neoconservatism

Introduction:

The educational policymaking in Turkey is highly political, hierarchical, and bounded within the structures of state and nation. Whilst the process of Turkey's accession to the European Union (EU) brought certain changes and switched the policymaking agenda and field to a more governance-based structure where there is networked decision making and consultation with civil society organs such as the media and NGOs beyond the nation-state, the traditional hierarchical relation of the bureaucratic state has not fully been contested (Author-B and Author-A, 2021). The deliberation with civil society is limited to those constituencies that support government ideology, and thus is not accommodating of the diverse bodies that ultimately have a significant effect on how the education system is designed. Several research (Siyez and Beycioğlu, 2020; Aksoy and Deniz, 2018; Author-A, 2019; Author-B, 2018) have considered the ideological assumptions embedded in educational policymaking discourse in Turkey and pointed out how such discursive politics in the field of education have stratified inequalities. Although much of this research focussed on both compulsory education¹ and early education, we, in this paper, provide a comprehensive and cross-cutting analysis of gender, childcare market-making and hegemony to argue how policymaking should be manifested in early education. We posit two justifications that are not, *per se*, unique to the Turkish context but have relevance to other low- and middle-income countries that are experiencing similar development challenges.

¹ Educational reform changes such as 4+4+4 education reform (12-year basic education reform) in 2012 have not considered the civil society's perspectives. There has been criticism towards the top-down educational policymaking approach from universities, teacher unions and different scholars.

First, the current rate of 38% extreme child poverty in Turkey (TUIK, 2016a) reveals the utmost importance of moving early education to the top of the education agenda if Turkey wants to avoid an increasing inequality gap. Therefore, promoting early education among, in particular, low SES families is vital, as not being able to attend pre-school further widens the educational inequality gap experienced by disadvantaged children. The literature (Bierman et al., 2017; Bivens et al., 2016) also stresses that enriching early education has the potential to equalise the possibilities for low SES children, allowing them a better chance of achieving social and economic success. Heckman's (2011) pre-school analysis shows that investing in pre-school education demonstrates a 7% to 10% return on career achievement of children and reduces costs in remedial education, whereas this return rate is just 1.5% for higher education. This finding was also echoed in the World Bank Report (2013) into early education in Turkey, which underlined that early education has a much higher return compared to any other phase of education.

Second, the lack of importance conferred to pre-schools in Turkey (compared to primary schooling) is also reflected in the GDP allocation to pre-primary education, which currently stands at 0.2%, much lower than the OECD average of 0.6%, making Turkey one of the countries that make the least investment in early education (OECD, 2017). In a country with a high number of children (22 million of an 83 million population) (TUIK, 2019b), early education should be one of the main priorities of the government. Although all educational activities are free of charge in Turkey, the nature of early education requires additional expenditure on the part of schools for facilities such as providing free breakfast etc. To be able to meet these costs, pre-schools ask parents for a monthly fee. Middle- and high-income families are able to meet such expenses, whereas this creates extra financial burden for low SES families who thus tend to avoid sending

their children to pre-school. The limited support of Ministry of National Education (MoNE), (e.g. providing materials for low SES district schools) is not really sufficient to maintain good quality early education for children. In a country like Turkey, where 21.8% of people live in poverty (roughly corresponding to 16.5 million) (TUIK, 2016b), paying even a small contribution can be a huge challenge to low-income families. Additionally, the indirect costs of education also exacerbate the costs associated with pre-school education. Considering that the poverty rate of 26.1% in society has been perceived among families who are illiterate (TUIK, 2019a), these families often struggle to invest in their children's education, which makes the importance of early education even more evident and represents an urgent area of policymaking in an upper-middle-income country with wide educational and economic inequalities, as is the case in Turkey, where access to early education depends essentially on the ability to pay for it. Several studies (Sevimli-Celik et al., 2011; Gol-Guven, 2018) argued for the urgent need for an early education policy that would benefit all children and families, but so far there has been no robust or effective initiative which, in the absence of policy documents, has instead been directed for the last few decades by programmes or directives. Therefore, by engaging with different stakeholders, we aim to highlight the initiatives and the key issues that should be taken into consideration within any future policymaking process. In doing so, the paper argues that conflicting perceptions, government rationality, economic concerns, and a top-down policy approach that ignores the views of stakeholders (i.e., NGOs, teachers, teacher trainers, etc.), play an essential role in low early education enrolment and the lack of any robust educational early policy discourse. Although there have been initiatives (such as increasing the number of pre-schools, revising the programme) promoted by the MoNE during the EU candidacy process, these initiatives and policy directives have not yet been enacted due to lack of political assertiveness to make early education

compulsory, and a constantly shifting political discourse that impinges on educational reforms. Given the messiness and complexity in policy-making, this paper ultimately aims to i) unearth the intersecting complexities of access to extrapolate successful strategies for getting every child into early education, and ii) to analyse the government's current approach to early childhood education policy.

We located this research within a critical tradition of policymaking and draw on the theoretical ideas and insights of Gramsci to underpin the reasons why there is not a strong early education tradition or discourse in Turkey. The thinking tools provided by the Gramscian lens reminds us that any policy design should account for those taking a direct part in the education system (i.e., teachers, pupils, and parents) and provides a means of critical thinking by which to understand the hegemonic structures embedded in policymaking in countries like Turkey.

Early Education in Turkey

There are political, economic, and social reasons that prevent early education from being a part of compulsory education in Turkey. When the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, early education was only offered in 80 pre-schools (Uyanık-Balat, 2015). With the attempt to create a new country and change the profile of its citizens, the young Republic gave precedent to primary education (Seven, 2014). Placing a heavy emphasis on primary education led the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) to issue two circular letters in 1925 and 1930 to transfer early education funding to primary education. Consequently, those a few early education institutions were even closed in city centres (Haktanır, 2014).

Efforts to increase the schooling rate in early education were very limited if, indeed, they existed at all, until the 1960s when Turkey's developing economic structure led to significant social change resulting from massive internal migration from rural to urban areas and increased demand for early education institutions, the latter because a large number of women who migrated to the cities entered the labour market to support their families due to the high costs of living in a city (Bekman, 1990). These efforts were limited by broadcasting the benefits of early education to society with no policies in place. As such, the schooling rate for early education for five- to six-year-old children was around 14% by the 2000s (Bekman, 2005).

Therefore, the biggest step towards the promotion of early education was taken in 2009 by identifying 35 pilot cities to include early education as part of compulsory education (although this has still not been entered into primary legislation). This change led to an increased number of early education teachers being hired by the government; nevertheless, in 2012, the educational system was changed dramatically. The MoNE divided non-stop compulsory eight-year education into 4+4+4 years, adding four more years of compulsory education. The position of early education in the new system came with certain ambiguities, however. Although the MoNE claimed that it was only a small adjustment, the age of early education was lowered from 61–72 months to 48–66 months. This change, which excluded 66–72-month-old children from early education, had a marked effect on the early education enrolment rate; it dropped from 65% to 58% in only six years. Lowering the starting age for primary education from six to five led to conflicting debates; for instance, some parents did not think their children were ready to start primary school and refused to send them (Gol-Guven, 2018, Author-A, 2019). Due to these reactions, the government altered

this decision and stated that children aged 60–72 could have the choice whether to attend pre-primary classes or primary school (Gol-Guven, 2018).

The final step regarding the promotion of early education was taken in 2016 when it was announced that pre-primary classes would become compulsory for children aged 54–66 months in 2019 (Gol-Guven, 2018). The inclusion of early education as part of compulsory education was to be initiated in 22 pilot provinces in 2019 to verify that the system would work for children, teachers, schools, and the Ministry itself. Nevertheless, one of the criticisms of this pilot research was that the government focussed on pilot provinces with a high enrolment rate, i.e., where families have already been sending their children to early education, and has otherwise neglected families from low socio-economic backgrounds living in more deprived areas. These increasing but limited initiatives have still not pushed the agenda for robust policymaking in early education and drafting policy documents. We argue that these limited educational policies/initiatives have been devised without any real concern for accounting for intersecting inequalities such as gender, or economic or political complexities. The state and its institutions need to collaborate with teachers, families, and teacher trainers to create sustainable changes in early education policymaking.

Why do Policy Documents Matter?

Since we aim to explore the ways in which to create a sustainable guide for an early education policy by looking at the current social, educational, political, and economic issues surrounding the education system in Turkey, it is important to understand what we mean by ‘policy’, and more importantly what this means in the particular context of Turkey.

Drawing from Ball's definitions of policy (1993), in Turkey it is often synonymous with 'discourse', not with 'text', since policy as discourse 'understands policy as part of the dominant system of social relations (...) frames what can be said or thought' (Ozga, 2000:94). Ball (1993) explains that policy as discourse considers the bigger picture, which is the way 'in which policy ensembles, collections of related policies, exercises power through the production of truth and knowledge, as discourses' (14). The emphasis is on the meanings and uses of words; power relations are constructed by discourse.

While policy texts 'are still crucial' and policy studies often require a systematic analysis of policy texts (Ashwin and Smith, 2015), what should be stressed is that policy is more than simply the policy text; it involves discourse shaped by "powerful structural forces of an economic, ideological and cultural nature" (Bell & Stevenson, 2006:9). Moreover, the issue with the Turkish case is that policies on education are not usually supported by multiple official policy texts. Most importantly, any educational changes in Turkey often happen according to discourses that take place within government (Author-A, 2019). For instance, early education has programme guidelines and curricula written by the Ministry of Education that address how to run the early provision. The Ministry of Education also publishes one or two-page documents that include rules for the basic education system (K12), and which in turn include the rules for the early education division. The latest of these documents was published in 2018 in the Official Gazette (Resmi Gazete, 2018). However, no official policy or reform initiatives detail the government's commitments, frameworks, or strategies that specifically consider early education from which one might be able to conduct a systematic discourse or a textual analysis.

The goal of the MoNE regarding early education is to make it compulsory and to increase its quality overall. However, it is not currently sustainable or, indeed, feasible to increase either the quality or the enrolment rates through compulsory education by introducing a mere few modifications and amendments to early education. The lack of any specific policy document or initiative tailored for early education weakens the robustness of the aims set by the MoNE. Likewise, it is also difficult for researchers to perform a literary deconstruction or derive and employ a meaning-making approach from texts. Therefore, the discourse of those (teacher trainers, families, and teachers) most directly involved in early education has become more significant to this research, and to a critical discussion of educational policymaking in general.

Critical Educational Policy Making: Educational actors and Hegemony

Gramsci's theories help to explain certain issues within Turkish society, such as the top-down policymaking approach, the hegemonic structure of the state, and tensions due to political change that directly affect the education system, leading to the ever-changing educational reforms that both teachers and children have to face. Gramsci's concepts that refer to social and cultural domination in his writings have been utilised by critical educational policy scholars because they provide a wider perspective on how education is not neutral and is always linked to the wider struggle of class, ideology, and politics. His analysis of state 'is centred on how all politics is educational and all education political' (Morrow and Torres, 2002:180). So, 'every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship' (Gramsci, 1971:350). Several scholars have already linked Gramsci's concept of hegemony to education (see Mayo, 2010; Borg et al., 2002), arguing that it is a site of hegemonic struggle and the simplest tool through which to transform society via cultural leadership (Borg, Mayo, & Buttigieg, 2002).

Within the Turkish context, we need to recognise that there has always been a continuing power and domination on the part of the state over educational policymaking. Given that ‘the policies and reforms should be understood in their ‘political, social, and economic contexts’ education’ (Ozga, 2000:114), Gramsci’s concepts help us unfold and analyse this context. Therefore, when considering policymaking in Turkey, it is difficult not to explore Turkey’s political context since the process is based on what is an almost exclusively top-down approach, meaning when it comes to policymaking, stakeholders (e.g., families, teachers, and students – the direct beneficiaries and practitioners of the policies) are not often informed and their voices are not heard by policymakers (Author-B and Author-A, 2021; Author-A, 2019). There is also a strong state tradition in Turkey that does not allow much room for any input from the public; that is, there is hegemony over public institutions, and societal and educational affairs. Therefore, it would not be too wide of the mark to say that policymaking is a political process in Turkey, and indeed this is well documented in the research of Author-A (2019) and Author-B (2020). Gramscian hegemony illustrates ‘one of the most useful analyses of how different world-views or ideological explanations of society may have an important bearing upon both the perception of society and of the process by which it evolves’ (Ransome, 1992:113). Thus, in this paper, we use the concept of hegemony to refer to the domination of the ruling class over decisions related to education. From the perspective of Gramsci, Turkey’s schooling system can be regarded as one of the most crucial aspects of the hegemonic process by which children are taught to maintain the status quo of the ruling class and by which education reflects the cultural hegemony of those in power, with little deliberation with agents of civil society. Therefore, the Turkish government has been criticised for not collaborating with stakeholders to design an educational reform that suits the needs of both children and teachers,

instead designing reforms that suit its own political aims and agenda (Author-A, 2019). Societies hold different values and confer different levels of importance to education, and these values are often shaped by the ruling class. Our beliefs and values, which are attributed to be common sense, represent a worldview that is otherwise accepted without question or critique. Various social and cultural environments help develop this common sense in the first place (Mayo, 2014). Therefore, our common sense is shaped by the realities of wealth and power and we tend to experience the world through the reflections of these realities (Crehan, 2011). Most families in Turkey have a strong belief in the state and support the national and state-wide curriculum. Since the early education is not compulsory, the majority of the population's common sense is that early education is neither necessary nor significant. Overall, the Gramscian theoretical lens provides an entry point to consider educational policymaking in a politically and socially complex country such as Turkey and shows the intersectionality of multiple aspects of everyday life's politics such as class, ideology, and hegemony, all of which form a battleground for any educational input and decisions at the national and international levels. Through the use of these concepts, we cannot only sketch out a road map for policymaking but also illustrate the fragile complexities and nuanced tensions that one may need to consider in global and critical educational policymaking.

The Project

For this research, we conducted semi-structured interviews with i) teachers and school principals, ii) parents, and iii) teacher trainers at universities. Preparing qualified and competent teachers in Turkey is the responsibility of teacher education programmes at higher education institutions. As such, teacher educators are linchpins in educational systems and are charged with training teachers who can teach students effectively. Although educational policies have an effect on the whole of society, not all the stakeholders — including practitioners, teacher-educators, and parents — take

part in the policymaking process due to the top-down approach taken to implementing the associated policies. Therefore, we aimed to gather in-depth information about the policies implemented and their outcomes on early education in Turkey and conducted 28 interviews.

The Respondents

In Turkey, early education policies mostly focus on increasing the schooling rate; therefore, Eastern Turkey was chosen for the fieldwork since it has the lowest early education attendance rate compared to the rest of the country. It is also one of the least economically developed regions of Turkey, where the immediate reasons for low participation in early education could generally be identified, as could the targets of the policy responses for policy-relevant research. Therefore, it provides us with ample space in which to devise policy actions and consider the rich possibilities with which to influence policymaking.

Interviews were held with ten practitioners including five pre-school principals and five early education teachers; ten parents (five parents who were sending their children to early education and five parents who were not); eight teacher trainers, who actually train pre-service teachers, working in Eastern Turkey. As policy implication for different SES (socio-economic status) groups vary, school principals and teachers were chosen based on their students' SES levels. For the data collection, ten schools were selected in total. Of these ten schools, three schools provided education for middle and upper SES-level children, a further three provided for generally middle SES but also had low SES children attending these schools, and finally the last four schools provided education for low SES income children. We conceptualised low SES based on parental income; parents working for a minimum wage and unemployed parents' dependent on benefits were taken as representative of low SES families. For parent interviews, snowball sampling was

used as a means to contact interviewees, whereas for interviews with teacher trainers, researchers contacted 20 academics working in twelve different universities; however, researchers were ultimately only able to interview eight teacher trainers in total.

The interviews with parents aimed to understand their motivations for early education and the issues they face as parents. The interviews with teachers focussed on more practical issues relating to early education as well as attendance and attitudes of parents; and the interviews with teacher-educators focussed on macro-level issues such as the governance of early education.

The Politics of Policymaking in Early Education

Drawing on interviews conducted with teachers, teacher trainers, and parents, we argue that the government does not openly prioritise early education for both economic and ideological reasons. The government's top-down approach, a feature of the generic education policymaking discourse in Turkey, prevents families from seeing the importance of early education. On the other hand, families from low-income households do not prioritise their children's early education and they are not sufficiently informed as to why it is important to send their children to early education institutions. One such reason could be related to conditional cash transfers that do not cover early education as it is not part of compulsory schooling. A further reason is the absence of comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns for early childhood as such nationwide broadcasts for compulsory education, in the past, were highly influential in terms of affecting decision-parameters of families (see Author-B, 2021). Below, we discuss the neoconservative politics, including gender, and economic drivers as to why both the government and MoNE do not prioritise the implementation of a compulsory Early Education Act. We then follow up with the existing top-down approach to and the absence of diverse civil society in educational policymaking.

Neoconservative gender traditionalism in the early education and childcare market

The fundamental question we articulate in this paper is why the government is not showing the political will to ensure more accessible early education despite the rhetoric discourse of emphasizing its importance. We argue that the neoconservative agenda that promotes religion in every sphere of life along with the traditional roles of women within the family plays a crucial role in the lack of commitment. As such, childcare is being seen as the main duty of women and a service that cannot be delegated to outside the household – this is well expressed both in speeches of the political elitists who praised motherhood as the only duty of women but also most recently in the childcare provision which offers financial support for women who take home care of their grandchildren before school age (Dogan, 2017). Given the increasing female poverty and the number of female labourers in low-paid and insecure jobs with poor accessibility to childcare and early education, this policy openly encourages gender essentialism and but also indicates that the government is not considering taking any action that could lead to the institutional provision of early education and care as a public service. Although some may argue that it was an act of recognising the informal sector of childcare and trying to make it more legitimate, it still does not change the fact that childcare is rather delegated to the private realm and the policy relieves the government of any responsibility for affordable and compulsory early education. In the absence of strong childcare provision, parenting (particularly mothering) sits at the centre of policy imperatives and shapes the culture of early education (Jupp and Gallagher, 2013).

The implications of this policy were likewise echoed among the participants who also argued that the early education is not being seen as an educational provision that is essential to the development of children's emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being but as a gendered care responsibility. In particular, the teacher trainers who have actively been involved both in Pre-service and In-service-training have stressed that the fundamental problem lies with how early education is being positioned as a care provision rather than an educational provision, both at the policy and political levels, and therefore promotes femininity as a political project of celebrating motherhood and reducing women's status in society.

However, such gender politics also intersects with class and economic concerns as they mostly aim to control the lives of women in low-paid jobs who cannot afford childcare and subsequently end up withdrawing from the labour market. As one of the teacher trainers states, early education is purely economic-related. Given that women's participation in the labour force was only 34% as of 2018 (OECD, 2020) and the women without higher education degrees tend to find fewer employment opportunities or withdraw from the labour market due to household obligations (Author-B, 2020), it seems only economical for the government to replace the social right and the duty of providing access to ECE by extending this provision to the familial space.

The underlying problem is economic – they do not want to invest in early childhood as they know that they can rely on women. The money put aside for early education is not even 1% of the overall budget. The biggest problem is how the government perceives early education (Teacher trainer 2).

The government's approach to early education also manifests itself in the limited campaigning for it. The interviews conducted with parents reinforced the idea that many of them were not made

aware of the importance of early education and were not provided with sufficient information. Both the parents and teachers' perspectives of early education indicated that raising parents' awareness of early education should become one of the key policy initiatives to increase enrolment in pre-schools and drew attention to the lack of support from the government with regard to early education:

Nobody has informed me about early education before. I have no clue what kind of education an early education establishment provides. However, I imagine that if my child had gone to one, he would have been more successful (Parent 2).

I wish someone told me about the benefits of early education. To this day, nobody has ever asked my opinion about this or tried to inform me. I do not even know if they are free of charge or not. There is always misinformation. It is too late now to send my child (Parent 4).

The parents above expressed regret at not knowing about early education and thus losing the opportunity to have their children educated from an early age. There was a common agreement among the parents who did not send their children to early education that they were not well enough informed in this regard, which is the biggest issue to be taken into consideration while making policies on early education. Most of the teachers we interviewed expressed the view that families often think that early education is not as important as other levels of education – one reason is that none of the public awareness or nationwide campaigns that have been launched actually promote it, unlike the compulsory education campaigns which have attracted a lot of funding and financial support from the UN, World Bank, and the EU since 1997 (see Author-B

and Author-A, 2021 for education initiatives in Turkey). It is also worth mentioning that poor income families receive conditional cash transfers to send their children to primary schools, but such financial support is not being offered for the early education level. In the absence of such incentives, some families are used to leaving their children with their grandparents or mothers, who look after them until they reach primary school age, which is, as previously explained, the acceptable norm among families. Families tend to believe early education only means play, and play is something that can be provided in their own homes. One of the teachers stated:

One of the biggest problems with early education is that it is not compulsory. Since it is not compulsory, parents do not understand its significance. Parents give more significance to other levels of education. Another thing is that schools have needs, these needs must be met, and parents will not send their children to a school without the necessary material (Teacher 10).

This extract also shows us that making early education compulsory is likely to have a significant positive effect on how families perceive it. The *Education Reform Initiative (ERG)* illustrated that making early education compulsory would increase attainment. In countries like Greece and Poland that passed compulsory early education laws have seen a noteworthy increase in the enrolment rates (ERG, 2013). When it is not compulsory, families seem to think, or otherwise infer, that early education is not that important. Commenting on the families' perceptions of early education, another teacher made a similar point about how families perceive early education as a place to play games, not as a part of schooling:

The MoNE needs to inform families about the necessity of early primary education. There should be more campaigns. Billboards and advertisements can be prepared to create awareness. Families should be told that early primary education institutions are not only places to play games (Teacher 2).

If awareness is not raised among the low-income families, this will lead to these families sharing the common sense that early education is not necessary and widen the already existing inequality gap between low-income and high-income families' children. This said, in addition to lack of incentives, contrary to the legislation that early education is claimed to be free, 65% of the costs are paid for by the families of the children (Gol-Guven, 2018). The state schools do not ask for tuition fees; however, they can ask families for donations or contributions towards the schools' needs since they do not always have the resources they need from the state. This varies according to the province and the location of the schools. If a family does not have a regular income, a 'small' contribution may not be small for them. As one of the parents stated during the interviews, early education is a place they would like to send their children, but the costs are too high for their household:

I cannot send my child to an early education institute due to our economic issues. The pre-school asks for a bit of money [donation] every fortnight and neither myself nor my husband can pay for this. I know these schools are free of charge, but even if they do not ask for money, there are non-tuition fee-related charges, such as stationery (Parent 1).

Another parent said:

My husband earns very little money. We can only manage to bring home the bacon so we cannot put any money aside for our children's education. The monthly donations pre-schools ask are too much for us to pay. So no, we could not send our child to a pre-school (Parent 3).

Given that "it is low-income families and their children who benefit the most from preschool education" (Gol-Guven, 2018, p.560) in Turkey, low-income families' struggle to pay the associated donations and the extra expenses, such as stationery, books, and transportation, should make ECE an urgent concern and a priority for the government. Yet, on the contrary, over the last decade, the government does not appear to have invested in public education and has gradually decreased the associated budget (Cumhuriyet, 2018). Even though education is free throughout the compulsory education years, the government has been sharing its responsibility in this regard with the private sector and the government's share for educational funding has decreased (Author-A, 2019). *Egitim-Bir-Sen*, the nationwide authorised teacher union, stated in their 2019 report that the government needs to increase the allowance that they put aside for early education since Turkey has the lowest enrolment rate among the OECD countries with regard to pre-school attainment (Egitim-Bir-Sen, 2019). Penn (2013) conceptualises this minimal government intervention, limited or lack of government finance for early education, and the low prioritisation of early education policies as "raw" childcare markets, and argues that they reinforce educational inequalities and exacerbate intergenerational poverty. Turkey provides a clear-cut example of such a raw market of childcare with limited provision of government-regulated care. Given that childcare is self-funded but also that the quality service provider depends on parents' ability to pay, the gap between the poor and rich children widens as those coming from low SES buy into the inadequate provision or none. We argue that the government's attempt to offer a limited provision that reproduces their

conservative ideology of care manifests itself in the tension between educational equality and the contingent gender and family model promoted by the governing party, where children from rich backgrounds can afford well-resourced and private schools whereas the rest are trapped within extra-familial childcare.

Moreover, the government makes these neoconservative childcare decisions with a top-down approach without realising its consequences to the families, teachers, and children. These policies, as made by a small number of actors that seek to produce their own desired policy goals, lack clear and concise language to communicate with the wider society (Matland, 1995). These actors do not see the effects the top-down policy implementations have in practice, which the next section explores.

Top-down hegemonic educational policymaking

The interviews conducted with teachers and teacher trainers for this research also revealed that a large number of programme changes are passed without seeking their input, and indeed often without their knowledge. A common view amongst the participants was that there is an evident top-down approach when it comes to decisions relating to any kind of educational issue. The early education teachers, in particular, stated that there are constant changes to the education system, yet they are never informed about them. These constant changes create instability in the system and it never seems to involve the educational actors who are actually expected to apply these changes in their classrooms every day; as one of the participants stated:

We cannot keep up with the programme changes; it keeps changing all the time. But, I still teach the way I learnt at university. In my opinion, all these changes have neither improved the quality of education nor spread early

primary education. The system changes according to the Minister we get. Things change according to the political environment and to the wishes of whoever is at the top (...) They look up to other countries in Europe, think 'oh we are behind', and panic, then they try to bring that system/programme here. However, it does not fit. (Teacher 3).

The participant's quote above indicates that some of the teachers still carry on with their existing teaching methods irrespective of any policy change. This could be interpreted as classrooms being open to counter-hegemonic acts (no matter how small these acts may be). This also indicates that "policy can constrain, limit and govern" (Jupp and Gallagher, 2013, p.156) the way teachers teach, and this is why some of the teachers resist the constant changes enacted by the government. So, such an approach indeed creates a space of contestation among teachers who think the initiatives offer no added value to their everyday practice. Most of the participants argued that policymaking in Turkey tends to be shaped by political actors rather than educational ones. The statement above also emphasised the fact that whenever the Minister of Education changes, the system changes accordingly, which underpins the argument that there is not a settled or established bureaucracy and system, but rather an order based on the directives of a political group. Moreover, the act of looking up to other countries is also echoed in other interviews, highlighting another point about educational policymaking, which is that there is an understanding that policies can be borrowed from other countries without attuning them to local contexts. This is not surprising since the same or similar education reforms and policy details are being used in various countries that hold different values and have diverse needs (Verger et al., 2018). However, educational policymaking needs to be planned at both the national and international levels. The comment above also reminds us that context matters to a greater extent than many policy makers and researchers realise

(Crossley et al., 2017). Far more attention should be given to the contextual and cultural factors of Turkish society before the country starts borrowing policies from other countries. Another interviewee, when asked about what influences early education policies in Turkey, alluded that educational policymaking is not a process that includes teachers. Similarly, another teacher mentioned that educational changes are often directly influenced by the political discourse of the country:

The educational policies should represent all the actors' views; they make decisions about children, but we do not ask the children, we do not ask the family, we do not ask the teachers. They say they try to make these policy changes according to the global trends, yet they also do it for ideological reasons, to keep their own ideology, to rally supporters. I wish they would not do this by using education all the time (Teacher 1).

This participant emphasised the fact that education should be used to meet its intended purpose of improving children's lives, not for ideological reasons. All the participants acknowledge the significance of putting children at the centre of educational policymaking and prioritise their needs, not those of the dominant class. In a Gramscian sense, education becomes one of various hegemonic tools since the hegemony of a dominant class is not controlled by coercion, but through moral and intellectual persuasion through education. One teacher trainer used the metaphor of a 'game' to indicate how policymakers constantly keep changing the system:

I see this policymaking as a game, a game that they play. I wonder if they think the easiest thing they can play with is education. I wonder if their aim is to raise people who will not question but obey (Teacher trainer 1).

The Turkish case shows us that power and ideology have a direct effect on education, whether early or basic education, and the various ideologies and discourses that governments have maintained throughout history have influenced educational policymaking progress in Turkey. The interviews suggested that there is no effective deliberation between policymakers, teachers, teacher trainers, and parents. The relationship between the state and civil society is underdeveloped and the government makes little effort to seriously engage with civil society. Even if it engages, it relies on traditional state power, supported by networks of sympathetic organisations (Author-A, 2019). Policymakers are not often aware of what is occurring on the ground, or what is happening within schools. There is no space in which to articulate ideas from educational actors who could guide a potential compulsory early education reform and clarify what is (or is not) working. Gramsci's understanding of "civil society" reminds us that having an autonomous institution could help to challenge assumptions and pursue better policies and reforms due to open dialogues.

Conclusions: What could an Early Education reform offer?

This research posited two important guideposts that should govern the principles of policymaking in early education. The first guidepost refers to the government's neoconservative agenda towards childcare. How can the formalised provision of informal care by a family compensate for wider inequalities? How can formalised early education, in the face of conservative and gendered attitudes towards childcare, mitigate the extreme poverty children face? These questions do not seem to be high priority as, to date, the policies and common sense have promoted gendered familial (maternal) responsibility to ensure family-based childcare. The discourse of seeing ECE as a care work rather than an educational institution instigates political intentions. The scheme that encourages grandmothers (but not grandparents) to look after their grandchildren are driven by an agenda of reinstating patriarchal nuclear family values. To this end, it is inferred that working

mothers are less effective parents and will be applauded for staying at home and looking after their children instead of sending them to early education, regardless of affordability. Such complexities in the gender politics of neoconservative agendas indeed produce thick morality and contribute to the social reproduction in society. This political ideology and such intentions should be seen as the hegemonic discourse in which the childcare market in Turkey operates. In addition to research (Aksoy and Deniz, 2018) claiming that some early education schools administer religious education, even the way in which childcare provision is being formalised and operated reflects the discursive and political hegemony of the government.

On the other hand, Turkey's raw childcare market raises the issue of the affordability of early education as a concern for low-income families. It leaves government at a critical juncture of offering a better regulated and controlled childcare market with subsidies, cash transfers, and monitoring at the expense of the political compromise of conservative ideology for greater educational equality. Our research shows that middle-class families are more likely to send their children to early education institutions and provide them with increased opportunities. It also demonstrates that early education governance and policy production are being carried out within the state and its governing structures, which are incognisant of the context of the field of early education schools and, indeed, who have access to early education. Considering the views of parents and teachers in relation to access to early education, we could argue that 'so-called free education', which still asks for contributions from parents no matter how small, seems to attract children of families from a certain socio-economic background. This has the potential risk of creating a school space that operates in middle and high income-dominated fields where the working class, rural, or those who live outside the margins of society may be devalued in a society

like Turkey where class distinctions have started to become more salient. The current education system assumes that each social class possesses similar economic and cultural capital, which does not allow children from low-income families to succeed well or offer the same opportunities to them in life as their peers who come from more privileged backgrounds. Considering that one in every three children lives in extreme poverty (TUIK, 2016a), compulsory free early education supported by economic and social provision and initiatives backed by the Turkish social state will also bring some level of justice to children from poor backgrounds, closing the inequality gap as early education compensates for certain disadvantages and has the potential to eradicate the gap in the capital between children from low- and high-income families. The study provides a critical insight into the route along which education may evolve if educational policies do not start to redress class inequalities and poverty at an early stage.

The second guidepost refers to the top-down educational policymaking approach in Turkey. This research once again establishes the fact that decisions relating to education — whether it is early, primary, secondary, or higher education — are shaped by top-down policymaking approaches. Even though the government often emphasises the importance of making ‘civil education reforms’ in which all the necessary stakeholders’ perspectives are considered, in practice this does not seem to actually be the case. A democratic educational reform necessitates public deliberation at all levels until the needs and voices of the least advantaged are heard and addressed. Education policymaking processes must attempt to involve all stakeholders — from teachers to families, families to teacher trainers— otherwise, they turn into power struggles where the dominant class uses education for its hegemonic discourses, as seems to be the case for Turkey. The needs of society, especially those of people from rural areas, should be heard, taken into consideration, and

included in any educational reform (see Author-C, 2018). This is also necessary for a democratic policymaking approach which is open to diversity and deliberation. Collaboration among families, teachers, and policymakers is the best solution to overcome families' concerns, and, more importantly, to build a reform that is informed by all the policy actors.

As we have argued elsewhere and here, educational policymaking is ideological (Author-A., 2019). The Gramscian idea of hegemony shows how the governments operate in policymaking and in this current research, we see that the link between educational policymaking and the role of stakeholders is almost non-existent. Even if there is some deliberation with civil society organs (teacher unions and NGOs), these are exclusive to those who share similar ideas with the government, which is not surprising since civil society is 'primordial and gelatinous' (Gramsci, 1971: 886) and the state and civil society has become one in Turkey. There should be space for all relevant stakeholders (i.e., teachers, parents, teacher trainers, NGOs, think-tanks, and unions) to discuss, debate and form educational policies and reforms, whether they hold similar ideas to the ruling class or otherwise. The alternative is that the education system, starting from early education, will become a space for the dominant class to raise its own intellectuals who believe and follow the same ideology as that imposed them. This is significant in the sense that if/when early education becomes compulsory, it is very likely to be designed purely according to the dominant classes' ideas and values, and such reforms and policies must be shaped by the needs of the people, not the ideologies of any particular group.

UNICEF's latest report (2018) on early education shows us that Turkey is, essentially, at the bottom of the list regarding the percentage of children participating in pre-school education. The

report once more emphasised that the majority of children in Turkey do not have access early education and are behind their peers in the other 40 OECD countries and start primary school without any experience of learning with and from peers since they do not typically attend pre-school. Therefore, these children start learning and interacting with their peers at a later age, that is, in primary school, and lack the social and cultural capital that other children gain from their early education experience. We are aware that generalising the outcome of this research, considering that we conducted only a limited number of interviews, and further, they were all conducted in Eastern Turkey may be seen as challenging, and there are other cultural, ethnic, gender, and linguistic (bilingual) issues that were not considered in this paper. However, the paper contributes to use of a Gramscian framework and focusses on the issues of neoconservatism, hegemony that is unanimous in many low and middle-income countries in the region and the world; as far as education is concerned, the focus is on primary and secondary education and the policymaking rarely includes deliberative participation from all stakeholders. This Gramscian notion of common and the production of consent through education policies maintains the neoconservative gender values and hegemonic process of decisionmaking. Our findings indicate that there are stakeholders, especially teacher trainers, who play a significant part in teaching the next generation of teachers, that wish to have a stronger and sustainable early education yet cannot be involved in the process or whose voices are not often heard in this regard.

Furthermore, this study represents a basis from which to consider the most basic issues in early education, providing an initial roadmap as a starting point. It seems that Turkey should show much stronger political will with regard to early education. If we do not want to leave any child behind, and no child in poverty, early education is a first and critical step, and starting point, for change.

References

- Aksoy, N., & Eren Deniz, E. (2018). Early childhood education in neoliberal, religiously conservative times in Turkey. *Policy Futures in Education, 16*(1), 108-123.
- Ashwin, P., & Smith, K. (2015). “Researcher creations? The positioning of policy texts in higher education research”. *Higher Education, 69*(6), 1007-1018.
- Ball, J., S. (1993). “What is Policy? Texts, Trajectories and Toolboxes”. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 13*:2, pp.10-17.
- Ball, J., S. (1990). *Politics and Policy Making in Education: Explorations in Sociology*. Routledge. London.
- Bekman, S. (1990). “Alternative to the available: Home based vs. centre-based programs”. *Early Child Development and Care., 58*(1), 109-119.
- Bekman, S. (2005). Early childhood education in Turkey: An overview. In O. N. Saracho & B. Spodek (Eds.), *International perspectives on research in early childhood education* (pp. 335–353). Greenwich: Information Age.
- Bivens, J., Garcia, E., Gould, E., Weiss, E., & Wilson, V. (2016). It's Time for an Ambitious National Investment in America's Children: Investments in Early Childhood Care and Education Would Have Enormous Benefits for Children, Families, Society, and the Economy. *Economic Policy Institute*.
- Borg, C., Buttigieg, J. & Mayo, P., (2002). *Gramsci and Education*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Cin F.M., Karlıdağ-Dennis E. (2021) Gender Equality in Basic Education: Feminist Constructions of the EU. In: Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm R., Cin F.M. (eds) *Feminist Framing of*

Europeanisation. Gender and Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-52770-9_11.

Cin, M., Gumus, S., & Weiss, F. (2020). Women's empowerment in the period of the rapid expansion of higher education in Turkey: Developments and paradoxes of gender equality in the labour market. Higher Education. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00587-2>.

Cin, F., M., Karlidag-Dennis, E., & Temiz, Z. (2018). "Capabilities-based Gender Equality Analysis of Educational Policy-making Reform in Turkey". *Gender and Education*.

Çiftçi, Ş. K., & Cin, F. M. (2018). "What matters for rural teachers and communities? Educational challenges in rural Turkey". *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 1-16.

Crossley, M., Koya, V. C. F., Lagi, R., McGrath, S., Thaman, K. H., & Waqailiti, L. (2017). "Quality education and the role of the teacher in Fiji: mobilising global and local values". *Compare*. 47, 6, 872-890.

Dogan, Z. (2017) Turkish grannies to get state salaries for grandchildren's care. Retrieved September 21, 2020, from <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/turkey-grannies-to-get-state-salaries-for-grandchildren.html>.

Haktanır, G. 2014. Okul Öncesi Eğitime Giriş (8. bas) [Introduction to Early Childhood Education, 8th ed.]. Ankara: Anı.

Heckman, J. J. (2011). "The economics of inequality: The value of early childhood education". *American Educator*, 35(1), 31.

Gol-Guven, Mine. 2018. "Ensuring quality in early childhood education and care: the case of Turkey". *Early Child Development and Care*. 188 (5): 557-570.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from The Prison Notebooks*. New York:

International Publishers.

Karlıdag-Dennis, E., McGrath S., & Stevenson, H. (2019) Educational policy-making and hegemony: monolithic voices from civil society, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 40:8, 1138-1153, DOI: 10.1080/01425692.2019.1647091

Kılıç, D. (2014). 4+4+4 Education System According to the Attitude of Classroom Teachers. *Atatürk University Institute of Social Sciences Journal*, 18 (3), 11-21

Matland. (1995). “Synthesizing the Implementation Literature: The Ambiguity-Conflict Model of Policy Implementation”. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. Oxford University Press.

Mayo, P. (Ed.). (2010). *Gramsci and educational thought*. John Wiley & Sons.

Monasta, A. (2002). “Antonio Gramsci: The message and the images”. *Gramsci and education*, 67-85.

Morrow, A., R. & Torres, A., C. (2002). “Gramsci and Popular Education in Latin America”. *Gramsci and Education*. Edited by Carmel Borg. 179-201.

Ministry of National Education Statistics (2017). *Education statistics of Turkey 2016–2017*.

Retrieved July 17, 2018, from

https://sgb.meb.gov.tr/meb_iys_dosyalar/2017_03/31152628_meb_istatistikleri_orgun_egitim_2016_2017_1.pdf

OECD. (2020). Labour force participation rate by age and sex group. Retrieved from <https://stats.oecd.org/index.aspx?queryid=54741>.

Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development. (2017b). *Starting strong 2017: Key OECD indicators on early childhood education and care*. Paris: OECD.

doi:10.1787/9789264276116-e

Ozga, J. (2000). *Policy Research in Educational Settings: Contested Terrain*.

Buckingham, Open University Press.

Penn, H. (2013). Raw and emerging childcare markets. In Lloyd, E., & Penn, H. (Eds.).

Childcare markets: Can they deliver an equitable service? Policy Press pp.173-190.

Ransome, P. (1992). *Antonio Gramsci: a new introduction*. New York,

Seven, S. 2014. Okul Öncesi Eğitime Giriş [Introduction to Early Childhood Education]. Ankara:

Pegem.

Sevimli-Celik, S., Kirazci, S., & Ince, M. L. (2011). "Preschool movement education in Turkey:

Perceptions of preschool administrators and parents". *Early Childhood Education*

Journal, 39(5), 323.

Siyez, D. M., & Beycioglu, K. (2020). Gender Equality in Education from Kindergarten to

Higher Education: Policies and Practices. In: *Handbook on Promoting Social Justice in*

Education, 1687-1710.

Turkish Statistical Institute – TUIK. (2019b). Child Labour Survey Results 2019. Retrieved from

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Cocuk-Isgucu-Anketi-Sonuclari-2019-33807>

Turkish Statistical Institute – TUIK. (2019a). Income and life conditions research 2019.

Retrieved from

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Gelir-ve-Yasam-Kosullari-Arastirmasi-2019-33820>

Turkish Statistical Institute – TUIK (2016b). Income and life conditions research 2015.

Retrieved from

<http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=21868> Accessed 8 April, 2018

Turkish Statistical Institute -TUIK (2016a). İstatistiklerle Çocuk, 2016

<http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=24645> Accessed 8 April 2018

UNICEF. (2018). *An Unfair Start: Inequality in Children's Education in Rich Countries*.

Retrieved from https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/an-unfair-start-inequality-children-education_37049-RC15-EN-WEB.pdf Accessed 1 January 2019

Uyanık-Balat, G. 2015. OkulÖncesiEğitimeGiriş (5. bas) [Introduction to Early Childhood Education, 5th ed.]. Ankara: Nobel.

Verger, A., Novelli, M., & Altınyelken, H. K. (2018). *Global education policy and international development: new agendas, issues and policies*.