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Equality of Educational Opportunity, Secularism, and The Aladağ Dormitory Fire

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the relationship between principles of equal educational opportunity and secularism, and religionization in the Turkish education system. This new development we argue has brought serious negative consequences for parents and students without the means to choose alternatives. We discuss these issues in the hard light of the Aladağ dormitory case, where a terrible fire in a private student dormitory, resulting in the death of many students and an educator. The fire broke out in Adana province, in southern Turkey at Aladağlar dorm on November 29, 2016. Twelve people lost their lives, including 10 female students, a 6-year-old daughter of the dormitory official, and an instructor. Also, some students were injured. The incident occurred due to negligence where the upper floor and attic of this dormitory building, which operates in violation of the regulations of private student dormitories, was completely wooden, the fire ladder was locked, the floors are covered with carpets, and there was no guard. The authors argue that neoliberal privatization of schools takes on a special character when private religious authority, is given responsibility for the educational safety and success of public school children. Thus religious institutions are included with all the commercial interests which had public responsibility for education turned over to them.

Keywords: *Equality of Educational Opportunity, Secularism, Neoliberalism in education*

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Introduction

Historically, social scientists have been attentive to political and economic institutions but religious and educational institutions have also been much considered. If we grasp how these functionally distinct institutions structures are connected structurally, we may better understand the social structure of a society (Mills, 2000, p.134). The Aladağ case seems to be worth discussing for at least three points to understand the sociological imagination of schooling in Turkey. Therefore, this paper examines the Aladağ case in the light of these three points: "poverty", "equality of opportunity" and "religionization-secularism" in education where the Turkish Constitution declares the secular nature of the state (article 2). More specifically, this case sharply dramatizes the corrosion of public education in which poverty inevitably pushes the low-income families into the laps of religious communities.

The Aladağ fire demonstrates that the problem for Turkish education is to equalize conditions, not only opportunities (Çataloluk, 2017). We discuss its importance for seeing necessary changes not only in student dormitory housing. For when any part of the compulsory education environment, from dorms, to classrooms, and services for students, is privatized, private interests are entrusted with our children's bodies and minds. This powerfully privileges more affluent families, for they may be able to create alternative educational environments where they can guarantee a scientific and secular education for their children and thus escape the state's religionization policy. Yet others have to leave their children to the sect dormitories only to receive an education. However, what ultimately pushes families into this situation is that the government reduces its investment in public education (Korkmaz, 2019).

Students who do not have access to secondary or high schools in the villages and districts where they live, are relegated to congregation and sect dormitories, since there is not a sufficient number of public dormitories, hostels and boarding schools provided by the State. Failure to carry out the necessary supervision and controls in these dormitories, as in Aladağ, has led to more

than one disaster. At the same time, students staying in these dormitories were obliged to perform religious rituals and worship determined by the dormitory administrations and required to participate in religious conversations" (Korkmaz, 2019). However, the freedom of belief and the right to education, which are guaranteed in the Constitution and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, are violated by such practices.

The Site and Event

The place where the incident took place is a very poor and mountainous village. The dormitory belongs to the "Aladağ Course and School Demand Aid Association" and this association is close to a religious community known as Suleymancis-called Süleymancılarin Turkish."(Bianet, 2018)

Allegedly, even the road to the village was asphalted after the incident (Evrensel, 2019). Zeliha Avcı, 13, was among the children who died in the fire. Speaking to BBC Turkish, her father, Mustafa Avcı, explained that they lived 35 kilometers away. Another state-run dormitory had been demolished because it didn't meet earthquake safety regulations. So the family's only schooling option was to leave her at the sect's dorm. (ERG, 2016). Mr. Avcı said, "Our financial situation wasn't good. The teachers told us to send our children to this dorm. We didn't want it, neither did the kids. But we didn't have an option. That's why our daughter was burnt to death there." (ERG, 2016).

When he was showing his daughter's portrait to the reporter, he was shaking and started crying. One of the mothers of the students, Cemile Baş, added that the staff of the sect's dorm came to their homes, they begged to send their children to the dorm and they told them that they will take care of their daughters. Cemile's daughter told her mother that she was afraid of being in the dorm and she did not want to stay there either. Cemile's husband Mehmet Ali Baş, who is a mine worker, stated that his daughter was eager to study, so he sent his daughter to the town, but he did not want to register her daughter in this sect's dorm. The district Director of National Education persuaded him by saying that he stayed and educated in these dorms. He also stated that they ensured that they will take care of their child; they will wash their clothes, they will give them food. However Mr. Baş found out that they forced their children

to wake up for praying early in the morning, to clean the toilets, carpets and steps on their own (BBC, 2016; Karar, 2016).

"Many families complained about aggressive recruiting tactics by powerful religious sects, and that once in the school, their daughters were forced to pray and clean and cook in the dormitories. Even worse, some of the surviving students reported that prior to the fire, handles to exit doors had been removed by school officials fearful that girls would leave without permission. A number of girls died by the sealed exit door. There is currently an investigation underway, and police have arrested six school employees. This is not the first time a deadly accident has occurred at a religious dormitory run by Suleymancilar. In 2008 in Konya, 17 female students died from a gas explosion in a dormitory. Despite a lengthy trial, no arrests have been made." (ERG, 2016).

The Aladağ dormitory fire reminds us of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire in the sense that how poor regulation and a low price on human lives leads to tragedy and catastrophe causing collective trauma. That fire drew international attention because it exposed the false promises of modern capitalist production, and the exploitation of workers, especially women. Both Aladağ dormitory fire and Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire are ironic in the sense that the students' and young women workers' died as a result of neglected safety features and locked doors within the factory building and the dormitory. A short summary of Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire may be helpful to understand the realities of the "working-class children competing for positions in a global market" as Senese and Page (1995) claimed while maintaining unjust security and living conditions.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire took place on March 25, 1911, just before closing time on Saturday evening. One hundred forty-six young immigrant women lost their lives because they were "unable to escape through the one unlocked door, the narrow staircase, and the inadequate elevators, many chose to jump to their deaths from the eighth and ninth floors; others succumbed to smoke inhalation and were incinerated in the factory itself" (Jewish Women's Archive, 2020). While the labor of women were undervalued

and underpaid for their flexibility (Senese and Page, 1995) in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the lives of young women workers, were undervalued because of their underpaid parents who are in need of any educational opportunity in Aladağlar Dormitory fire. So it is necessary to discuss poverty and equality of opportunity in education within the concept of public education.

Secularism in Education

Regarding equal access to education, it is important to note the structure of Turkish education, and how secularism came to be embodied in the Turkish Constitution. The Turkish educational system is characterized by equal opportunities where opportunities are provided to everybody, men and women. Necessary aid is provided through free boarding, scholarships, loans and other means to ensure that successful students without financial means are educated to the highest educational levels (Basic Law of National Education with number 1739). In practice, inequality of opportunity in education in Turkey, especially in the rural-urban division, creates severe social problems and consequences related to poverty. Inequalities, especially for children of low-income families in access to education, facilitate the preference for religious structures such as sects and congregation, which offer a low-cost accommodation option.

The educational opportunities that the state is obliged to offer, relate to the constitutional right to education, however they are now insufficient, and undermine the principle of equality in education irreparably. The religious communities whose aim is to raise people in line with their beliefs and lifestyles can easily be effective on the poor and desperate people. This incident is a serious series of rights violations since the state could not provide the right to education for the children of the state mountain villagers, the state's financial means are not used to build a dormitory in place of the destroyed dormitory, and these dormitories were not adequately supervised by the state (Çataloluk, 2017).

The concept of secularism is a Western-based thought system through intellectual development and practice. In essence, secularism is to consider state-religion relations, that is, worldly and spiritual relations, and to act according to

this principle. Secularism states that religious affairs should not interfere with each other's areas (Birdişli and Kaçar, 2017). Secularism is a concept related to the Christian religion and was used to refer to those who were not clergy during the first days of Christianity (Günday, 2011). In Turkey, secularism is defined as the fundamental principle of freedom of conscience, including religious beliefs. Secularism aims to isolate the religion of Islam from its social function, to put it in the inner worlds and consciences of the people (Günday, 2011). With secularism, religious rules have been freed from the state and legal order; the state has accepted religious service as a public service and the Presidency of Religious Affairs was established (Günday, 2011). The reason for this is that, "if religious services are left to the communities, it is thought that the communities will become competing power and their clashes with the state will be inevitable and religion will regain social function by moving out of their inner worlds and consciences" (Günday, 2011, 55). Indeed, the coup attempt by the Gülen movement in 2016 confirmed this assumption.

With the assembly of the Assembly in 1920, state sovereignty, which was previously owned by God and used by the Caliph Sultan in his name, had become available to the nation. Thus sovereignty descended from the sky to the earth. On March 3, 1923, the Unification of Law No. 430 was declared eliminating the duality in the school system was ended and all schools were connected to the Ministry of National Education. Thus, individuals who receive religious education in schools managed by private foundations are prevented from causing division in society. With this law, the Ministry of National Education was also given the task of opening separate schools to educate religious experts such as imam and pilgrims (Günday, 2011; Altunya, 2019). Again, due to the purpose mentioned above, the Ministry of National Education was given the duty to train officials who provide religious services as an exceptional duty until the revolutions took root (Altunya, 2019).

It should be noted that the Abolition of the Caliphate with Law No. 429 is also an important step taken in terms of secularism. Finally, with the amendment made in the 1924 Constitution with the law numbered 3115 in 1937, secularism was clearly stated as the quality of the state. 1961 and 1982 as

one of the qualifications specified in the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey is a secular state with the following three main features: 1. The absence of an official state religion. 2. The state administration and social relations are not subject to the rules of religion 3. The state organizes religious services as a public service (Günday, 2011).

Poverty and equality of opportunity in education

The existence of equal opportunities in education is evaluated according to the following four criteria (Levin, 1976): (1) equality of educational access; (2) equality of educational participation; (3) equality of educational results; and (4) equality of educational effects on life chances. According to these criteria, the provision of equal opportunities in Turkey fails to provide the desired effect, especially for low-income families.According to the traditional American definition, public education is defined as follows: (1) the government provides an education (2) free to the pupils and (3) it funded through public taxation (Golstein, Gordon Gee & Daniel, 1995; cited in Wilkins, 2005). However, on the base of article 42 of the Turkish Constitution, public education consists of more than this definition, It is ensured by the state that scholarships and other means of assistance should enable students of merit who are lacking financial means, to continue their education. Moreover in article 42 “education” is accepted as a fundamental right and freedom. As a result of this article, MoNE regulates the scholarship, school dorms and other social aids by law.

Recall Coleman’s (1991) now classic answer to the question of how to achieve equal opportunities and opportunities in education acknowledging the need to do different things for children from different backgrounds. For Coleman, schooling requires different educational policies under different conditions. Indeed, what needs to be done in a school community of children from different backgrounds is not simple. Coleman explains the economic and social conditions of families in three stages, the families in the first stage lead a life that is either at minimum living conditions or slightly above. At this level, the livelihood of households is widely farm-based and these are households in a village-based society. In such societies, there are tasks that children can always

perform, both because the household has a low economic level and their many tasks of differing complexity for various aged children.

Many such families have many children and the family too often exploit their labor. Families' perspectives are narrow and because they have very little education, they are little concerned with developing the child's interests and resources. This is likely because such families are unacquainted with what wider opportunities exist at all. In such an economic and social structure, the primary role of the school is to protect children from the exploitation of the family and to provide an expanding effect beyond the horizons of the family. Family child restrictions and limits; school breaks some of these ties and reduces restrictions. The school is the child's savior from the exploitative conception of the family. However, countries with economies and social structures of this type are likely the poorest, so the economic resources needed to provide education opportunities are also limited.

The main goal of our national ideal is the rights of the citizen and human rights extended despite one's physical or social condition in life. It is to increase the participation and success among school students, not just including, but especially those who are disadvantaged in terms of language, poverty, ability, and special needs. Another goal of education is to increase individuals' learning pleasure and their preparation for citizenship duties. If we see schools as micro-societies, we can predict that learning justice at school will help young people to shape the concepts of justice outside of school, according to the way justice is reflected in schooling policy.

Regardless of the school system, it is a known fact that disadvantaged students tend to make less progress at any school stage than other students, especially since they have poorer learning conditions than other groups. Thus, students' experiences of justice, and especially injustice, can undermine their interpersonal and institutional trust, promote passive attitudes towards political and civic engagement and openly 'intolerance' to those who are 'different' (Gorard and Smith, 2010, p.3-4).

Three main factors indicate the importance of equal opportunities. The first is the central place of education in modern societies and the numerous opportunities it provides; second, the lack of high-quality educational opportunities for many children; and third, the critical role of the state in providing educational opportunities. These factors distinguish education from other social products. How best to interpret the ideal of equal opportunity in education is a critical question. Can equal opportunity be achieved when everyone with similar abilities gets the same results? When do the educational expenditures per student equalize? Are those with the same natural talent potential equalized when they get the same opportunities? (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2017).

Neoliberal/religious transformation

Public education and religiosity are in a new relationship in the neo-liberal era. Public oversight of personnel, safety, public spaces is lacking in places like dorms, among others. If there is a need for a dormitory in a region where students can stay and if this requirement is not met by the state especially for compulsory education, this constitutes an obstacle to the realization of the right to education.

Let's look at an example from another developed society undergoing this social part of neoliberal transformation--where privatization and religious groups are interacting compatibly. Turner writes, "social groups in Britain which want to attack the dominance of the state in educational provision have mobilized the liberal perspective on free choice, parental authority, and pluralism to achieve state support to finance an expansion of the private sector. These developments have been especially crucial in the growth of denominational schools" (Turner, 1986, 48).

In Turkey, almost the same developments are recorded and the *Imam Hatip* middle schools were reopened with the recent law code nr.6287. The Aladağ dormitory fire, and other such facility failures, is one of the casualties of the state's religionization and privatization policy. It is not possible to think of religionization and marketing in the education system separately; because

both are implemented as mutually "nourishing" institutional policies (Korkmaz, 2019).

With the recent schooling development plan, and 2010-2014 strategic plans of MoNE, the schooling endeavors in rural areas are left to denominations (Gençkal Eroler, 2019). Also see Turner here for a warning on the social costs of the loss of the secularity that would provide public accountability-- "The trend towards privatization of schooling will tend to reinforce the prevailing inequalities in the school system and within the wider society" (Turner, 1986, 46). Moreover, this tendency can be seen in the speech of President Erdoğan in which he pointed out "that raising a pious generation was among his duties as the head of government" (Middle East Eye, 2019; Korkmaz, 2019).

If these educational barriers are not removed, there will be no equal opportunities in education. If the secularism and equal opportunities in education are not implemented together, various sects will continue to fill the fields that the state has left empty for various economic and ideological reasons. If the government continues to refrain from operating in these areas, civil initiatives such as civil society organizations, unions, and opposition parties should now step in and meet these needs.

Conclusion

When we consider the "sociological imagination," the family pain of this case is a part of the analysis. For that encourages the social scientist better ability to see our scientific questions of society in light of relationship and fellowship in the experience of unfair conditions. The questions may be the same, but "data" has a face and a heart.

Experiences of such pain due to neglect of the public's right to educational fairness are harmful to everyone. Attitudes are built in and on social structures, so it is difficult to change those structures, for attitudes have also to change. (Brinkerhoff, White, Ortega and Weitz, 2011). Education is a basic tool to build and change the social structure. Secularism as important as education, and has taken its place as an immutable part of the constitution as a

force in the construction of the social structure. Considering this doctrine, it is obvious that to solve the problems which arise from poverty and inequality, the social structure should change. The case of Aladağ represents how the personal troubles are connected to the "public problems" arising from the forms of social inequalities such as poverty and desperation.

The country's capacity to provide a strong school system with full family and local community support is lacking, but reforms could be instituted. Educational opportunity largely depends on the private resources opportunity provided by the family and the immediate environment, -- their “social capital.” The state should not be an accomplice in unfair social conditions that the entire public must participate in. Unwarranted, preventable conditions of inequality include those which can begin to improve, if leaders consider the critical problems and consider new law and new policy.

So, we return to the law on education where, “Education is a public service that is available to all citizens, and Article 42 of the constitution, entitled ‘Right and Duty of Training and Education’ states that, ‘no one shall be deprived of the right of learning and education’ (Axiarlis, 2014). With these conditions in place, there is no democratic oversight or public accountability for the conditions children and their parents must accept, and in cases of neglect, endure.

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