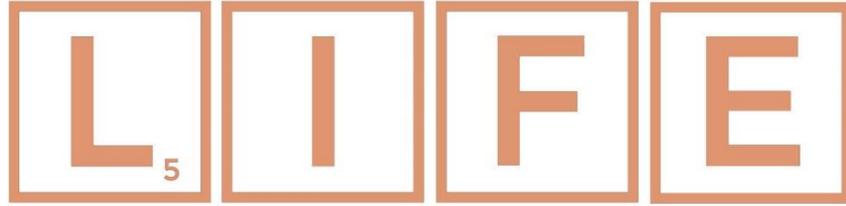




Learning Interculturality From rEligion



THE CURRENT SITUATION OF RELIGION EDUCATION AND MULTICULTURALISM IN TURKEY *Desk Research*

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Project Number 2016-1-IT02-KA201-024660

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein



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Concept of Religion

Religions and belief systems could be the foundation stone of many cultures. It has a significant role of shaping lifestyles, customs and perceptions of societies. According to the conceptualization of Council of Europe, “*Religion is a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and worldviews that relate humanity to spirituality and, sometimes, to moral values*” (2017). In this case, it might have a power both to create diverse cultures and way of lives but also to lead great conflicts within the societies due to disputes between radical belief systems. One of the leading global issues of 21st century, namely terrorism, may be the best example for conflicts which is driven by religion. It uses excessive and unpredictable violence in order to build terror or fear among societies for attaining political, religion or ideological goal (IEP 2015). More than 61,000 incidents of non-state terrorism, claiming over 140,000 lives, have been recorded from 2000 to 2014 (Fortuna 2015). In this sense, agencies of international and national law, which are governments, transnational and international organizations, have been taking preemptive measures in different areas to eliminate suffering and conflicts due to clash of different religions and belief systems. For instance, article 18th of Universal Declaration of Human Rights indicates that “*everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance*”. Another international written law about freedom of thought and “*freedom to change his religion or belief*” is the Article 9 of European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Interculturalism and Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism and interculturalism are two different concepts while the prior basically defines the presence and acceptance of different cultures within a single country; the latter supports actions which support intercultural dialogue, tolerance and understanding instead of sole acceptance (Harper 2011; Penaz & Saenz 2006). Government policies and strategies which supports communication among



cultures and different belief systems may be considered more useful for decreasing conflicts due to clash of cultures rather than promoting centralization on diversity and cultural uniqueness that might cause intercultural competition and lead to ethnic conflict (Caval 2001; Hurd 2011).

Turkey has always been a refuge to people from diverse cultures and belief systems. For instance, since the early 15th century Ottoman Empire has opened its gates to hundreds of thousands of Spanish, Armenian, and Portuguese Jews along with Russians, Polish and Europeans in search political asylum in the course of over 600 years (Aydin, 2012). Owing to its historical nature, Turkey has become a home for various cultures, ethnicities and religions. Furthermore, according to the International Religion Freedom Report of U.S. Department of State, in Turkey, within the population of 79.4 million, *“there are 15 million to 20 million Alevi Muslims. Alevi foundation leaders report higher numbers, estimating 20 million to 25 million Alevis in the country. The Shia Ja’fari community estimates its numbers at three million”* (2015). The rest of the people who are from different religions compose %1 of the population and they mostly live in Istanbul and other large cities (2015). *“While exact figures are not available, these groups self-report approximately 90,000 Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Christians; 25,000 Roman Catholics; 15,000 Russian Orthodox Christians; 10,000 Bahais; 22,000 Yezidis; 5,000 Jehovah’s Witnesses; 7,000 members of Protestant denominations; 3,000 Chaldean Christians; and up to 2,000 Greek Orthodox Christians; “there also are small, undetermined numbers of Bulgarian Orthodox, Nestorian, Georgian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Anglican, and Maronite Christians. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimates its membership at approximately 300 individuals. Estimates of the number of atheists vary, but most recent published surveys suggest approximately 2 percent of the population is atheist”* (2015).

Besides the religion diversity there is also a significant amount of ethnic variety who have their own languages and cultures in the country. Owing to ethnolinguistic estimates in 2014 by Ethnologue, while %70.6 of it is comprised by Anatolian Turks; %10.7 is Kurmanji Kurds and %7.7 is Turcophones Kurds. Moreover, Zaza Kurds, Lebanese Arabs and Kabardians Circassians compose less than %2 of the population (2014). According to The World Factbook the population



in Turkey is Turkish 70-75%, Kurdish 19%, other minorities 7-12% (CIA, 2017). Lastly, Iraqi Arabs, Persians, Azerbaijani, Romani, Gagauzes, Pomaks, Pontic Greeks, Adyghe Circassians, Alevi Kurds, Georgians, Bosniaks, Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Lazs, Karakalpaks, Albanians, Armenians, Abkhazians, Han Chinese, Ossetians, British, Macedonians, Jews, Tatars, Assyrians are the rest of the ethnic groups which constitutes less than %1 of it (2014). In terms of policy in education, government took several actions to include other languages within the country such as Kurdish, Arabic, Zaza language and Circassian. However, it is still not adequate for an extensive intercultural education.

In consideration of these religion and ethnic demographical facts of the country, government policies, which support interculturalism, should become very significant and one of the priorities in order to achieve peace and tolerance among citizens of Turkey.

Methodology

In this research elements of qualitative method had been pursued. The study was comprised in two stages. In the first one (desk research), all the studies, which were carried out in Turkey, legislations, legal regulations and syllabus about religion education, were examined. At the second stage, opinions of educators had been taken with the semi-structured focus group method, which is one of the qualitative methods of research. There were 8 participators in the focus group discussion including the moderator, projects assistant, one primary school principle, one inspector and teachers from various branches. During the semi-structured focus group method, the discussion was being recorded with the consent of the participators while the critical statements had been taken into notes by the project assistant. Afterwards, content analysis method was applied to analyze the acquired data in order to create a report. This data is constricted by the opinions of the participants.



Legal and Current Situation in Turkey about Religion Education at Schools

The decision of European Court of Human Rights on compulsory education in September of 2014 has raised debates on the subject in Turkey. Since 1924, the legislation in Turkey enforces the religion education and its effects on Turkey's secularity has been debated hotly ever since. More specifically, the 14th article of Turkish constitution states that religion education must be supervised and be under control of the government. Current situation in Turkey about the new curriculum, that Turkish Education Ministry proposes, is still in process of taking feedbacks. On compulsory religion education issue, Ministry does not have any clear decision on whether to comply to the ruling of European Court of Human Rights in 2014 September or not. Therefore, in a new curriculum proposal the religion and ethics course has not presented yet.

According to MEB's (Ministry of National Education) current syllabus of Religion, Culture and Ethics Course, one of the main purpose is introducing fundamental cultural and moral values of Turkey to the students through education of Islam (MEB 2010). It states that a vast scale of the culture, such as literature, music, arts and customs, comprises of Islamic belief and the way of life (MEB 2010). In this sense, it is believed that teaching religion of Islam will preserve cultural values and raise students who have respect towards their heritage (MEB 2010). The syllabus also contains respect to other religions and cultures, reforms and democratic values of Atatürk, national solidarity and respect to human rights and environment (MEB 2010). Among twenty eight objectives of the course, two objectives, the 2nd and the 27th, aim to teach students respect and tolerance to different cultures and beliefs through education of basic characteristics of different religions other than Islam. 27th falls under the three Universal objectives that also include emphasizing the overlap of universal humanistic values and Islamic humanistic values; secondly, making the connection between universal values and "their own religion", here "own religion" means Islam so it can be seen that the ministry accepts the Turkish students as Muslims who should follow the discipline of Islamic religion (MEB 2010). Through the education program starting from 4th grade until the end of 8th grade, just %9,5 of the subjects are created for education of different religions and only one subject, which demonstrates %4,5, is about love, friendship and fraternity apart from religion



of Islam. Additionally, the list of concepts that will be taught during the 5 years of the course includes only 4 religions other than Islam and no major beliefs within Turkey, such as one of the most practiced religion sects Alewism, and universally.

Moreover, right of exemption from the course has been another issue for a long time. While the students from Christian and Jewish families can practice the right of being exempted from the course, it is still not possible for other students who are from different kind of religion and belief system or simply does not want to be included in the lecture due to various reasons (Kaya 2015). For instance, it is stated in various reports that Alewi students have been facing difficulties and impracticability about exemption from the course (ERG 2011; Kaya 2015; Eđitimsen 2017). As a consequence of this kind of issues, increasing possibility of discrimination and eroded freedom of thought become inevitable current facts, which take their place at the top of the heap of current problems that Republic of Turkey has been facing for a long time.

Besides the inefficacy of curriculum and matter of exemption, multicultural personality level of teachers also falls within primary criticisms. According a recent study from Journal of Research in Education and Teaching, investigations show that the majority of teachers are lacking to be multicultural models and they should be educated more during university in terms of how to teach in a multicultural society and communication between cultures (Şahin & Kılınç 2016). On the other hand, it is proved that having a sensitive behavior towards different cultures increases the success and progress of students (Banks, et al., 2001). Therefore, teachers are playing a crucial part in following the means of multicultural education and having an equal attention for all children coming from different cultures (Polat & Kılıç 2013). Since they are the most important actors who have an enormous impact in development of students, the results of various aforementioned studies become a worrying and unpromising fact for a highly multicultural country which needs a proper education of interculturalism among its citizens.

In the light of these facts, it could be concluded that subjects are extremely insufficient for covering the necessities of intercultural education and cannot embrace other beliefs and religions within Turkey adequately. As Eđitim Reformu Girişimi (Initiative Reform of Education) (2011) and Eđitimsen Öğretmenler Sendikası (Teachers' Syndicate) (2017) reports indicate that current curriculum in public schools



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are not satisfying enough in fulfilling some basics such as supporting religion diversification and respect to other cultures and beliefs. Hence, students are being raised without knowing the other elements of the culture that are considered as minority; however, has been playing important role in making it very rich and diverse throughout the history.



Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Background

Being aware of the system of religion education, conducting a focus group discussion with various teachers and experts in the field of education had been very helpful in order to gain a perspective over the impact of multiculturalism in religion education. Besides the familiarity with the changes and actuality in the theory of religion education, the existence of several elements of awareness in their classrooms/schools that is open to evolutionary development had also studied during the discussion.

Executive Summary

Focus group discussion was held in one of the most multicultural and intercultural private schools in İzmir. Although it is still obliged to follow the national curriculum, it has conducted many actions to support the multicultural nature of their school and Turkey. In this manner, having included some of their teachers and the principle was an illustrative example for the group about an intercultural education. It also had been recorded by the consent of the participants in order to do a more coherent analysis of the meeting.

There were 7 questions, which aim to the focal discussion topics of the project, and the last questions was the part that allows the participants to add their further opinions about the subject. Respectively, the discussion points that had been touched upon illustrate both positive and negative sides of the current religion education in Turkey. Possibility of an impact of the current refugee situation on the religion education in Turkey, the advantages and disadvantages of the current religion education considering the majority of the population as Sunni Muslims, discussion about the chance to support multiculturalism and peace by religion education, advantages and disadvantages of teaching other religions and beliefs; and lastly, the role of religion education in multicultural societies as a holistic or discriminatory fact were the topics that were being put on the table.



As it can be understood that the issue had been discussed not only from various perspectives but also a distinctive sample focus group in terms of achieving a concrete analysis to describe the problems and suggest further recommendations.

Description of the Participants

The discussion conducted between 8 participants which is comprised of four primary education classroom teachers from different schools, one of them is the principle of the school, one inspector of Ministry of Education and one science teacher, from other schools; additionally, the moderator and the project assistant. The gender equality had also been taken into consideration while generating the focus group as in two classroom teachers and the principle are female, and the rest of them are male.

Having the discussion with a highly experienced and distinctive group, who are very eager to be part of the development, helped the members to conduct an immensely productive discussion.

Key Findings

There is a significant similarity between the desk research data and the qualitative data from the focus group discussion. Universality and multiculturalism of the education, compulsory religion education, issue of the right to exempt as one of the discriminatory effects of the curriculum and rote-learning based education system of religion were the main criticized elements of the current religion education in general and particularly in Turkey. Furthermore, the impact of the refugee issue on religion education was also a remarkable part of the discussion.

One of the key findings of the discussion is that the current curriculum is lack of supporting multiculturalism and teaching other religions to students. It was claimed that the aims defined by the curriculum and the syllabus according to the MEB (Ministry of National Education) does not match in terms of turning aims in to actions; as in, there are a lot of universal claims to be achieved in the objectives of the current curriculum but there is an extreme inconsistency when one analyses the actual syllabus of the lesson, as also mentioned in the part of the desk research.



Not any participant stated a substantial advantage or a positive side of the current curriculum; in fact, the disadvantages had dominated the debate. It had been highly argued that this kind of education system is leading to not only discrimination among students from different religions and belief system, but also, students who are experienced rote learning and less intercultural religion education are tend to be more radical and close minded towards other cultures at the present or in the future. Being educated without having the philosophical background of any particular religion, starting from 4th grade, makes pupils to think it is not a debatable or questionable matter. Therefore, they might have difficulties about building their own opinion both about religion and any other further matters that they may face in their future lives because it could be claimed that comprehensive and critical thinking cannot be achieved without a lot of questioning.

The exemption issue and conducting religion education as a compulsory lecture were also being discussed as a discriminatory aspect. When a lecture is called compulsory, it means that the government does not give a right to choose to students whether they are willing to have a religion education. Moreover, having a religion education mostly based on one religion and practical teaching of worshipping without the theoretical background leads to a concept called exemption. However, giving right to exempt for merely Jewish and Christian students create an inequity among pupils who are representing different religions, beliefs or even atheists. Likewise, it can also alienate Christian and Jewish students from their classmates. For these reasons, the matter of exemption should be dealt with in a way that it will not constitute a discriminative environment in a multicultural schools and societies.

On the other hand, interestingly, one of the participants stated that there are several drawbacks of having an intercultural school and religion education. In aforementioned private school, students have the opportunity to celebrate their own religion and cultural events besides the customs of Islamic religion. Also, in every school publicity ceremony for the parents, it is made sure that the school is representing diversity of culture and religions within their education and social system because it's aim is raising world citizens who can keep up with highly globalized world with countless different cultures. However, sometimes goals like these can cause problems with the parents based upon experiences of the participant. Parents who are very religious or really connected with the local culture may believe that this



kind of activities cause cultural eruption. As a result, it is suggested that also parents could be informed through different kind of approaches such as workshops in order to tell them there could be an intercultural education without losing the local culture and peace could be achieved within a multicultural society.

In terms of analyzing and predicting the future impacts of refugee issue on religion education, religion life in Turkey in terms of its differences and similarities with their religion life, post migration interactions and integration processes of refugees are questioned. It was asserted that while because the majority of the Syrians being Sunni Muslims have been a facilitative factor for the orientation period, the differences of practicing the religion made some contradictions between two societies. To illustrate, Syrians practice the religion in a more conservative way than some part of the Turkish society as in their way of clothing or being stricter about worshipping. However, at the same time, following the same religion has been serving as a consolidative component between two cultures. In this sense, by recognizing the both positive and negative aspects, it had been concluded that there would be no major impact on religion education because of the refugee issue in Turkey.

Comments

At the end of the discussion, high similarity between the desk research findings and the commentaries of the group could not be overlooked. Main highlights of the discussion were inconsistency between the written objectives and practiced curriculum, compulsory concept of the religion education, issue of the right to exempt and rote-learning based education system of religion. In this manner, it can be concluded that necessary developments and regulations are needed for a better religion education that is suitable for multicultural and multi-religious societies.

Firstly, if the main objectives had been properly integrated into the actual program, the course would achieve to address more cultures and religions. For instance, article 2nd and 27th among the twenty-eight objectives of the curriculum, which supports teaching respect and tolerance towards different cultures and beliefs by educating students about the basics of various religions, could be actually put into practice. In this way, inconsistency would be rehabilitated with a coherent and consolidative syllabus.



Respectively, the regulation about religion education being compulsory is another topic that should be worked on. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the basic human rights; thus, the right to choose of having a religion education should be optional for all students so that a peaceful and non-discriminatory environment would be retained between students.

Finally, it was stated that rote-based education system does not give a deeper understanding of the concept of religion and ethics. Hence, more interactive and practical form of a religion education could be carried out. Thereby, students would start to develop a critical way of thinking for a better aspect of learning.

As a result, for the universality and interculturality of the religion education, the topics that had been discussed in focus group discussion and founded in the desk research could be taken into consideration in order to play a role as a unitary component of the education system.

All in all, the group discussion was very useful in terms of both verifying written studies and having the opportunity to assess current religion education through more practical and face-to-face experience. Due to variety of participants we had a productive meeting with a lot of perceptions. Likewise, the comments of the participants were highly positive about the productivity of the discussion. Hence, the data will be really helpful during a preparation of a common recommendation.



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