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ScienceDirect

Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 1 (2009) 101–104

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

World Conference on Educational Sciences 2009

Emergence of individualism, entrepreneurialism and creativity in turkey's state-run educational system: anthropological contributions to educational sciences

Müge Ayan Ceyhan*

Istanbul Bilgi University, Dolapdere Campus, Kurtuluş Deresi Cad, No: 47, 34440, Dolapdere, Istanbul, Turkey

Received October 7, 2008; revised December 11, 2008; accepted January 2, 2009

Abstract

This paper focuses on a private primary school, which encourages values of individualism, entrepreneurialism and creativity, and stands in contrast to the state system promoting conformity and obedience. Based on real life experiences and practices on the ground, a discussion on different models of personhood underlying different educational practices forms a key part of the paper and I also discuss the extent to which participants of the school vacillated between different perceptions of personhood. In a broader interdisciplinary context, I will provide a clear example of the way in which anthropology can contribute to educational sciences, and highlight the interrelation between the two disciplines.

Keyword: Anthropology; educational sciences; personhood; individualism; conformity ;

1. Introduction and Argument

We are in an age where education is imbued with different meanings; the scientific and technological developments of the transnational world have led, with an unprecedented speed, to the reorganization and fluidity of knowledge. This inevitably necessitates a reconceptualization of education. In this context, Turkey had gone through an educational reform, which came about in the summer of 2004: 'Pupil-centered' new curricular programs, based on critical thinking, problem solving, creative thinking, entrepreneurialism and communicative abilities were first tried in a number of pilot schools. Currently, they are being used in all schools in Turkey.

By way of stressing the significance of a particular area of Turkey's current educational reform; namely teacher training, this paper questions the extent to which this reform can succeed, and attempts to uncover the underlying reasons. Arguably, the success of the educational reform primarily depends on teacher training. Changing the curricular program would remain inadequate unless these reforms are supported by the sound grasp of the essence of the program by the teachers. Reformists need to develop an awareness that teacher training is not limited to methods and techniques to 'teach'. Well beyond that, it involves introducing another understanding of personhood to the teachers' perception. The relationship between the teachers and the pupils needs to be established in compliance with the understanding of personhood lying on the basis of the educational model: By means of introducing first hand data gathered at Bakış School[2] --an upper middle class primary school in Turkey where I did participant observation for a year and a half, this paper aims to serve two main purposes: first, it will point at two different conceptions of personhood in relation to two different sets of educational practices in Turkey and thereby emphasize an aspect of Turkish education, which has been so far overlooked. Secondly, and in a broader interdisciplinary context, it will provide a clear example of the way in which anthropology can contribute to educational sciences, and highlight the interrelation between the two disciplines: Schools base their philosophies on different criteria. In the case of private schools for example the focus is often on meeting the demands of the 'customer' in the form of the parent. Therefore, rather than asking what the school philosophy is, the

* Müge Ayan Ceyhan. Tel.: +90 212 3115261; fax: +90 212 2569657.
E-mail address: mayan@bilgi.edu.tr.

1877-0428
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2009.01.019

crucial question to be asked is what the philosophy means to the participants of the school in a wider social context. The observations about the efforts made in order to put the philosophy into practice are highly revealing. Arguably, in the process of putting the philosophy into practice, it is the conflicts hidden in the intricate data gathered by the ethnographer that reveal the crucial realities of the educational practices.

To give a contextual basis to my argument, I shall first unveil the obedient and conformist character of the educational system. Then, I will go on to present ethnographic examples from Bakış School, which encourages values of individualism, entrepreneurialism and creativity, and stands in contrast to the state run educational system promoting conformity.

2. The Obedient and Conformist Character of the Turkish Educational System

Educationalist Öner states that the democratic understanding underpinning school guidance is 'purely a North American import', and that it recognizes individual differences and presents choices. She explains the disparities between the theory and the practice of guidance and counseling in Turkey with the fact that although Turkey is a democratic state by constitution, it is 'culturally authoritarian by tradition' (Öner, 1997: 152). She emphasizes overprotection and strict discipline as the most pervasive parental attitudes. She comments: 'A close look at the socio-cultural heritage and philosophical values inherent in the Turkish education system shows that traditional authoritarianism has been the most predominant attitude in child training and education. The resultant natural expectations are discipline of the mind and behaviour of the student to produce the best outcome; the latter defined as academic success. . . Authoritarian respect for teachers, school administrators, and adults implies the meaning that they know it all! Being older, more educated and personally experienced, these people know best what is good for students; what is good for their advancement. Therefore adults have to be listened to and their advice suggests to be followed' (Öner, 1997: 153-154).

Ülsever's comments about Turkish education complement Öner's findings: Ülsever, an economist and columnist in the popular Milliyet Newspaper states that the Turkish educational system does not raise people who question. On the contrary, it raises civil servants who know how to receive and obey orders, and who are not allowed to ask questions. According to Ülsever, 'what is taught in the first week of the military service is taught in eleven years in the educational system', because the system aims to ensure the continuity of the Turkish state and to minimize potential objections to it (Erdoğan, 2002: 30-32). The influence of the army on teaching practices is readily observable in most Turkish schools, irrespective of whether they are state or private schools. In P.E. classes the main exercise is to make pupils march, turn right and left, as if in the army. This observation has applications beyond teaching practices in P.E. classes. Here I am arguing that the controlling, intervening and repressive character of the army is reflected, although unconsciously, in the educational system in so far as it shapes a hidden curriculum, the inculcation of which is embedded in the learning process in schools. A common saying in Turkey about the military is '*askerliğin başladığı yerde mantık biter*', which means 'reasoning ends where the military begins'. This saying refers to the rigid and unquestionable standpoint of the military as an institution in the eyes of the people. This kind of rigidity encompasses intolerance for alternative and/or opposing views and establishes the correctness of one sole institutional truth with a top-down, hierarchical approach. While sameness is promoted as the expected norm, difference is subject to punishment. Needless to say, this kind of a rigid structure does not leave room for discussion. One has to abide by the rules and accept orders received from the authorities. This character of the army is not only reflected in the educational system but also is an important aspect of Turkish social life. Feeling oppressed vis-à-vis the authority, and therefore not standing up for one's rights, as is expressed in the Turkish idiom 'köprüyü geçene kadar ayıya dayı demek' ('one should address the bear as 'uncle' until (s)he passes the bridge'), is the rationale behind the learned behavior governing social relationships. This rationale also has important implications in shaping the frame of reference of the socially constructed concept of the self with respect to others.

3. Social Construction of Personhood in Bakış School

Bakış School was founded on 1998, and in a couple of years it became one of Turkey's most popular schools. It aimed at rise up pupils who stood up for their rights, who expressed themselves, who took risks, and who solved their own conflicts. As the previous section suggests, the stereotypical idea of the 'Western individual' was incompatible with the state-run, highly centralized schooling systems, which encourage pupils to be submissive to authority (Ayan, 2006). By way of questioning the extent to which teachers comprehended Bakış's ideals, and thereby giving an account of the educational practice to which this incompatibility leads, the following ethnography aims to guide us through the argument that on the basis of any educational model lies an understanding of personhood, and the successful practice of educational models depends on the compatibility of the two.

1.1. Standing up for one's rights

Pupils in Bakış lined up in front of the counter and waited for their turn to pick up their meals in the dining hall everyday. Teachers lined up with the pupils, and whenever they were in a hurry, they gently asked the permission of the pupils to get in front of the line and usually explained why they were in a hurry. This not only points at the lack of hierarchy between the teachers and the pupils but also it tells us about the idea of the person: an individual possessing rights which no one is entitled to get from them. And so, they develop the awareness that they do not have the right to get someone else's rights.

In 2004, we took the third graders on a fieldtrip. In the restaurant the pupils of another school tried to get in front of the Bakış pupils who were all lined up in front of the counter to pick up their meals. Our pupils were disturbed by this, and complained to their teachers about it, saying 'teacher, they are not lining up'. Bakış teachers were the ones who had to warn the other pupils to go and line up as they were not even reprimanded by their own teachers. Obviously their teachers did not see any harm in it. Both the pupils and the teachers (of the other school) seemed to ignore others' rights. Apparently the lack of emphasis on the conception of pupils as individuals with rights in the educational system also gave them the right to ignore others' rights. This ethnographic example indicates that although Bakış pupils knew their rights they did not quite know how to defend them. They were astounded when they had their rights taken by other children just as their teachers must have been astounded in trying to teach them that they were individuals with rights. Teachers were far from fully comprehending the concept of the individual the school aimed to promote. Solving one's own conflicts, defending one's rights, standing up and expressing oneself, taking risks were all values the school aimed to promote, but again such a concept of personhood seemed to be unfamiliar to most teachers.

1.2. Expressing oneself

Compared to the mainstream Turkish schools, where the teachers are expected to reproduce a given structure and to suppress them, and the pupils', 'agency', Bakış gave its teachers a relatively significant degree of autonomy. Nevertheless, the reaction of a Bakış teacher concerning what happens when the teachers were given a say in the meetings is as follows:

The Music teacher who had grown up in Germany and come to Turkey only a couple of years ago said in a perplexed and disturbed manner: 'I do not understand why no one says anything! I am always the one in meetings who expresses objections. And because no one else says anything, I come across as the difficult person who always disapproves.' Growing up in Germany was undoubtedly the reason why she felt perplexed when she saw that people would not show their reaction. Had she been educated in Turkey, it would not be difficult for her to see why 'no one says anything'.

1.3. Taking risks

For AG, the founder of the school, one of the major frustrations of Bakış stemmed from the gap between what was expressed to the public and what could be practiced in school. He called this the 'unrealistic standards set by the education businesses. There were various educational methods that private schools were expected to adopt, such as Multiple Intelligence, High Scope, Montessori, and International Baccalaureate. Bakış had to promise the parents that it provided education in accordance with these standards but for AG they were not 'realistic': 'And this results in a constant feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction. Teachers keep feeling that they have not done enough and that something is missing, no matter how hard they work. It is like advising a man to give a rose to his wife and kiss her every night. This is a very nice treat. Granted. But it is impossible to continue that consistently all through one's life. But the wife who hears of this keeps expecting the rose every night! Here we are supposed to teach the pupils how to take risks. But we do not take any risks ourselves.'

The last sentence in AG's account shows what he means by 'unrealistic standards'. Why did the teachers never take risks? The reason why these standards were unrealistic was because the idea of taking risks was unfamiliar to Turkish people in general. What AG called the 'unrealistic standards of the education business' actually stemmed from different conceptions of the personhood. He was describing the stereotypical idea of the 'Western individual': his teachers were expected to teach the pupils to be individuals in the Western sense but their conception of selfhood was constructed in such a way that they were completely unfamiliar with the concept of risk-taking. They were raised in schools and families which taught them to be obedient and conformist.

1.4. Solving one's own conflicts

In the Bakış pre-school, teachers taught pupils to solve their conflicts by themselves. One of the parents who saw her child having a problem with another child asked the pre-school teacher angrily, 'why didn't you do anything?' This parent's reaction is instructive of child rearing strategies in Turkish society: The idea of solving one's own conflicts was unfamiliar to the parents.

AG said: 'People are raised to be dependent in Turkey. Families are over-protective. They decide everything. You cannot become a man. The society is castrated. You cannot go and find yourself. It is a family syndrome which does not allow you to be anything other than a driven child. People do not set targets and reach them. They do not have that independence. What do the Americans do to a three year old child? They lay out a piece of cloth on the floor, put the meal on the table, let the child learn how to eat all by him/herself. If you don't eat, that's fine. The next meal is at 7 p.m. Thank you. Bye. And so the kid says "I did

it, I learned it". In Turkey they spoon feed you. Some of the pupils live in houses with three nannies. The pupils are incapable of getting dressed on their own. They are dependent.'

Here again, AG was describing the fundamental Western independent individual. His words showed clear admiration for the 'Western concept of the individual' and strong criticism of the Turkish understanding of personhood. No matter how much he criticised the Turkish model of child rearing, his school both reproduced and challenged this model. I witnessed, for instance, his favourite teacher literally begging her pupils to eat.'

4. Conclusion: Educational Models and Personhood

The relevance of the ethnographic material to the broader aim of the argument is that it practically illustrates the difficulties confronted by the participants of the school in trying to establish an alternative educational system based on an understanding of personhood, which is different than their own.

As has already been mentioned, on the basis of any educational model there lies an understanding of personhood. When we investigate deeper into the core of educational systems it is important to note that they are built on different perceptions of personhood. While some may emphasize the primacy of the individual to a wider social context, others downplay the individual. Needless to say, in models promoting the superiority of the wider social context to the individual, the way in which wider social context is defined varies in important ways too: while some models place a special focus on the primacy of 'community', others emphasize the 'nation'. The choice of model is the decision of the nation-state, in cases where it holds the right to educate the masses and thereby to play the gatekeeper's role in cultural production.

When importing a model, it is important to question the extent to which the understanding of personhood would/could be adopted in the recipient society. Instead of importing educational models without questioning the underlying ideas of personhood, it is worth asking the following questions: to what extent is the imported model expected to be welcomed in the recipient society, what difficulties are foreseen, and more importantly, in which way are the cultural producers introducing the new model prepared to handle the difficulties faced in the renegotiation process?

Commentators criticize the fact that governments keep changing the educational system in Turkey. This is the reason why they raise doubts about the current educational reform too. Turkish education has long fallen into the trap of importing new models and trying changes. It is of utmost importance to note that the Turkish educational system with more than ten million pupils enrolled only in primary school is too massive to be the victim of a trial-and-error exercise, since a set of failures in this exercise might lead us towards deadlocks.

By way of presenting real life experiences and practices on the ground, this paper pointed at two different understandings of personhood underlying two different educational systems. In a broader context, this paper can be read as a clear example of the interrelations between two disciplines; namely educational sciences and anthropology. Arguably, data of this kind could only be gathered through participant observation, because what was visible at first sight differed in important ways from what is observed the longer one stays in the field. It would not be wrong to call what was visible at first sight as the school philosophy and what was observable in the long run as the school practice. And the ethnographic evidence clearly suggested that there were differences in degree between the philosophy and its practice. Here I would like to draw attention to the salience of these 'differences in degree' as I do not believe that any practice could fully reflect a philosophy but still find it ultimately important to focus on the reasons and tensions underlying the divergence between ethos and practice. In order to consider this issue fully, it is necessary to ascertain which points of the philosophy are in congruence with the practice and where the two fall apart before investigating the reasons underlying the disparities. I believe that the interrelation between anthropology and educational sciences will lead us to the heart of the matter.

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