

History, Identity, and Education: The Impact of the Discourses of TRNC Presidents on Education Policies

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the discourses of the Presidents of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) on education policies. Education in the TRNC has been a crucial component of identity construction throughout its historical process, and the discourses of political leaders have played a significant role in shaping education policies. In this context, the study analyzes how the discourses of TRNC Presidents regarding education policies are reflected in the education system through discourse analysis. The primary objective of the study is to reveal the impact of presidential discourses on education policies in the TRNC. Initially, the study discusses the political history of the TRNC and the process of identity construction, followed by an examination of the role of education in this process. The statements of the Presidents at different periods, their attitudes toward education policies, and their influence on educational practices are evaluated using the discourse analysis method. The study finds that each President has developed distinct discourses on education policies based on the political and social conditions of their respective periods. While some Presidents emphasized the role of education as a tool for strengthening Turkish Cypriot identity, others adopted a more pragmatic approach, favoring education models aligned with international standards. These differences in discourse have played a decisive role in shaping education policies. The findings of the study indicate that education in the TRNC is not merely an academic process but also an integral part of identity construction. It has been determined that presidential discourses directly influence education policies, manifesting in various aspects, from curriculum changes to teacher policies. Furthermore, the study concludes that the political conjuncture and Cyprus negotiation processes also play a significant role in shaping education policies. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that the discourses of the Presidents have a substantial impact on education policies in the TRNC. This research provides a crucial framework for understanding how education policies in the TRNC have been shaped within historical and political contexts. It is also suggested that discourse analyses of this nature can contribute significantly to guiding future education policies.

Keywords: Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), President, Education, Media, Discourse Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The education policies in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) have undergone various transformations throughout history, shaped significantly by the discourses of the country's political leaders. The statements made by TRNC Presidents regarding education policies play a crucial role in shaping social identity and directing the education system. Education is not merely a means of transmitting academic knowledge; it also serves as a tool for strengthening social belonging and preserving the Turkish Cypriot identity. This study examines how the discourses of TRNC Presidents have influenced education policies and compares the policies and statements of different Presidents regarding education.

The education policies of the TRNC have been shaped in accordance with the historical and political developments on the island. Following the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, the education system in Northern Cyprus was restructured within the framework of close relations with Turkey. After the declaration of the TRNC in 1983, the Presidents actively played a role in determining the fundamental directions of education policies. From the early years, the Turkish model was adopted in education policies, with a strong emphasis on national identity construction.

The education policies of the Turkish Cypriot community have undergone different phases throughout history. In the 1960s, while living under the Republic of Cyprus, the Turkish Cypriot community faced significant restrictions in education and struggled to establish its own education system. After 1974, education was perceived as a key instrument in the institutionalization process of the TRNC. Particularly, collaborations with Turkey in the field of education led to significant reforms from primary to higher education in the TRNC.

Salih Sarpten, in his book *The Historical Development, Council Decisions, and Education Policies of the Turkish Cypriot Education System*, emphasizes the multifaceted nature of this process by stating that “the roots of the Turkish Cypriot education system reflect not only political developments but also social dynamics.” Furthermore, according to Sarpten, “the decisions of the education council serve as indicators of fundamental changes within the education system,” highlighting the pivotal role of these decisions in shaping reforms.

Examining the development of the Turkish Cypriot education system from the Ottoman Empire to the present day necessitates an analysis of the social, cultural, and political factors that have influenced its structure:

- **Ottoman Period (1571–1878):** Education in Cyprus during the Ottoman rule was based on a religious framework introduced by the Ottoman administration. During this period, the educational needs of the Turkish population were mainly met by religious schools. However, literacy rates were low, and education remained largely confined to religious subjects.
- **British Colonial Period (1878–1960):** With the beginning of British administration, the education system underwent significant transformations. Although the British attempted to modernize local education, there were major disparities between Turkish and Greek communities in terms of education. The education system was shaped primarily along ethnic lines, with both communities encouraged to establish their own schools.
- **Independence Period and the 1960 Constitution:** With the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960, structural changes in education accelerated. Issues such as educational equality, multilingual education, and cultural discrimination became prominent. However, political tensions and ethnic conflicts within the Republic of Cyprus left deep marks on the education system.
- **Post-1974 Turkish Cypriot Education System:** Following the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, Turkish Cypriots began to establish an independent education system in Northern Cyprus. The restructuring of institutional frameworks in education became a crucial focus during this period (Sarpten, 2020).

Education policies play a critical role in constructing the historical and cultural identity of a nation. Particularly, history education is considered a key tool in shaping national identity (Smith, 1991). In countries like the TRNC, where international recognition is limited, education policies influence not only academic success but also the formation of collective identity (Karadağ & Kılıç, 2019).

In this context, the discourses of TRNC Presidents are significant in shaping the direction of the education system. Leaders’ statements on history, identity, and education have far-reaching impacts, from curriculum design to educational reforms. This study aims to examine how the historical and national identity discourses of TRNC Presidents have been reflected in education policies.

CYPRUS COUNCIL DECISIONS AND EDUCATION POLICIES

A detailed examination of the Council decisions, which hold a significant place in the Turkish Cypriot education system, is essential. The Turkish Cypriot Education Council has functioned as a fundamental body in determining education-related policies. The decisions made by the Council have had a substantial impact on the development of education.

Structural Reforms in Education: The Council decisions have played a crucial role in implementing structural changes and reforms in education. For the first time, comprehensive education policies were formulated, addressing key issues such as teacher training, curriculum regulations, and school infrastructure.

Intellectual and Societal Reflections in Education: One of the primary objectives of the Council decisions has been to examine how the identity, culture, and societal structure of the Turkish Cypriot community are shaped through education policies. Special emphasis has been placed on language, history, and cultural courses to strengthen the Turkish Cypriot identity (Sarpten, 2020). A thorough analysis of how Turkish Cypriot education policy has evolved and developed over time is essential.

Priority Areas in Turkish Cypriot Education: Some priority areas in education policies have been determined based on the needs of society and the structural challenges of the education system. These areas include teacher training, the revision of textbooks, strengthening school infrastructure, and initiatives aimed at higher education development.

Efforts to Improve Education Quality: One of the major issues in the Turkish Cypriot education system is the lack of quality. Reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of education have been introduced, including curriculum modifications and innovations in teaching methodologies.

The Turkish Cypriot Education System and Policy Makers: The individuals and institutions that shape the policies of the education system also play a significant role in the literature. The Ministry of Education, teachers’ unions,

and other public institutions related to education have been critical in shaping the Turkish Cypriot education system.

This section provides a comprehensive overview of how Council decisions have influenced the formulation and evolution of education policies in Northern Cyprus, emphasizing the role of reforms, societal reflections, and the contributions of policymakers.

TURKISH CYPRIOT SOCIETY AND EDUCATION

A comprehensive examination of the impact of the education system on society is necessary. The relationship between the Turkish Cypriot community and education is one of the most significant factors shaping the social structure of the society.

Education and the Modernization of Society: Education has been a crucial instrument for the modernization and development of the Turkish Cypriot community. Through education, efforts have been made to achieve social development, democratization, and economic growth.

Education and Identity Issues: The education system has significant effects on ethnic identity, culture, and the preservation of national values. In this context, the Turkish Cypriots have sought to strengthen their historical and cultural identity through education.

This section highlights the integral role of education in shaping the social and cultural fabric of the Turkish Cypriot community, emphasizing its influence on modernization and identity formation.

THE TURKISH CYPRIOT EDUCATION SYSTEM AND HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

The education system in Cyprus has been shaped by nationalist discourses in terms of historical narratives for many years. The history textbooks used in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) predominantly present a Turkish identity-centered narrative, framing the Cyprus issue primarily within the context of Turkish-Greek conflict. In this regard, the education system has played a polarizing role, focusing on strengthening Turkish Cypriot identity and presenting historical events from a particular perspective.

Particularly following the 1974 Cyprus Peace Operation, the historical narrative emphasized the victimization of Turkish Cypriots and portrayed the Greek Cypriot side as the aggressor. Rather than fostering a shared historical narrative with Greek Cypriots, history textbooks have been structured around a discourse that reinforces division. This process has also been shaped within the framework of TRNC's relations with Turkey, with history education serving the purpose of integrating with Turkish national identity (Önen, Dağseven, Karahasan, & Latif, 2010).

This section examines how history education in the TRNC has been influenced by nationalist discourses, emphasizing its role in shaping collective identity and political narratives.

EDUCATION REFORMS AND RECONCILIATORY TRENDS

Since the early 2000s, particularly under the influence of the European Union harmonization process and bicomunal projects, history education reforms have become a significant topic in Cyprus. During this period, efforts were made to adopt a more reconciliatory and multi-perspective approach in history textbooks.

Following the 2004 Annan Plan, certain education reforms laid the groundwork for history textbooks to develop a more objective and peaceful discourse. The newly designed curricula in the TRNC during this period contributed to incorporating a more pluralistic and reconciliatory narrative into history education. However, due to political shifts and societal sensitivities, these reform initiatives have experienced setbacks at times (Önen, Dağseven, Karahasan, & Latif, 2010).

This section examines the transition towards a more inclusive and balanced historical narrative, highlighting the challenges and limitations of education reform efforts in the TRNC.

THE POLARIZING OR RECONCILIATORY IMPACT OF HISTORY EDUCATION

When evaluating the Turkish Cypriot education system, the function of history education can be examined under two main categories:

Polarizing Impact: When history textbooks are written to reinforce a particular national identity, they may emphasize certain aspects of the past while ignoring others. The history textbooks used in the TRNC for many years have primarily focused on conflicts with Greek Cypriots, aiming to strengthen Turkish identity. These

narratives, by presenting historical events from a one-sided perspective, have made it difficult for students to be open to alternative viewpoints.

Reconciliatory Impact: As alternative historical narratives develop and bicomunal educational programs receive support, history education has the potential to contribute to the peace process in Cyprus. However, such initiatives have frequently been disrupted by political and societal factors.

For instance, while some teachers and academics argue that history textbooks should adopt a more reconciliatory perspective, certain political groups and segments of society have opposed these changes, viewing them as a form of “identity erosion”. This resistance has been one of the primary obstacles to the implementation of education reforms.

What Should Be Done?

The Turkish Cypriot education system has experienced both polarizing and reconciliatory trends in terms of the content of history textbooks. History education, particularly in Cyprus, is directly linked to negotiations and political processes. Although efforts are being made today to develop a more pluralistic and neutral history education, this process remains dependent on political will and societal dynamics.

To promote social reconciliation, the Turkish Cypriot education system should move toward more balanced and inclusive historical narratives. However, for this to be achieved, history education must go beyond being a mere tool for identity construction and take on a role that supports a culture of peace. Education policies should address past events from multiple perspectives objectively, thereby fostering an environment of dialogue and cooperation between the two communities.

In this context, the Turkish Cypriot education system stands at a critical crossroads: Will it continue to foster division, or will it embrace reconciliation? Transforming education into a peaceful and pluralistic framework requires more than just revising history textbooks—it also necessitates teacher training policies, curriculum reforms, and public awareness initiatives. Only through such measures can history education shift from exacerbating past wounds to becoming a tool for building a shared future (Önen, Dağseven, Karahasan, & Latif, 2010).

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND EDUCATION

Education systems serve as a crucial tool in the construction of national identity. In the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), education goes beyond the mere transmission of academic knowledge; it carries the mission of strengthening social belonging and preserving Turkish Cypriot identity. The discourses of TRNC Presidents have played a decisive role in this identity-building process. In particular, the emphasis on national history, cultural heritage, and relations with the motherland (Turkey) has been a prominent aspect of education policies. The history and social studies curricula have been designed to highlight the political status of the TRNC and its ties with Turkey.

The construction of Turkish Cypriot identity has been shaped particularly through history courses and curriculum content. The Ottoman period, British colonial rule, the 1960 Republic of Cyprus, and post-1974 developments have been regarded as major milestones in education. The history and social studies courses have been structured to reinforce the idea that the TRNC is an independent state. However, the emphasis on identity has varied across different Presidential terms (Irkad, 1997).

The discourses of TRNC Presidents have directly influenced the content and direction of the education system. The key elements that have shaped education policies in the TRNC include:

Strengthening National Identity and Historical Awareness: National identity and historical consciousness hold a significant place in the education curriculum. TRNC Presidents have consistently emphasized the importance of transmitting knowledge of Turkish Cypriot history to future generations. History courses have covered the Ottoman period, British colonial rule, and the post-1974 period in detail. Salih Sarpten underscores this point by stating, *"The discourses of Presidents play a determining role in shaping education policies."*

Continuity of Turkish as the Medium of Instruction: The official language of education in the TRNC is Turkish, and all Presidents have shared a common stance on maintaining this policy. However, at different times, there have been calls for greater emphasis on English education, particularly in higher education. The increasing number of international students has sparked debates on expanding English-medium instruction, especially at universities.

Enhancing Educational Cooperation with Turkey: Educational collaboration between Turkey and the TRNC has significantly influenced curriculum development, teacher training policies, and student exchange programs. TRNC Presidents have actively encouraged academic support from Turkey and have promoted policies aimed at increasing scholarship opportunities for students.

Internationalization of Higher Education and Foreign Student Policies: In recent years, universities in the TRNC have become increasingly attractive to international students. TRNC Presidents have expressed their aspirations to position the TRNC as an "education island", advocating for policies to attract more foreign students. However, they have also stressed the need to maintain quality standards and develop regulatory mechanisms in higher education (Feridun, 2011).

Balancing Secularism and Religious Education: While secularism has traditionally been a fundamental principle of education in the TRNC, there have been periods where religious education has gained prominence. The establishment of Imam Hatip schools and the introduction of Qur'an courses have been among the controversial topics in the education policies of different Presidential administrations.

Salih Sarpten highlights that education reforms in the TRNC have been shaped not only by Presidential discourses but also by Council decisions. He states, "*Education system reforms have progressed in parallel with both leadership discourses and Council decisions,*" summarizing the dynamic interaction between political leadership and policy-making bodies in shaping the education system.

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: PRESIDENTIAL STATEMENTS ON EDUCATION

An analysis of the statements made by TRNC Presidents regarding education reveals that different periods have been marked by distinct emphases. For example:

- During Rauf Denktaş's tenure, there was a strong emphasis on national identity, history education, and integration with Turkey. These discourses positioned the education system as a key instrument for reinforcing national consciousness.
- Under Mehmet Ali Talat's administration, the focus shifted towards harmonization with Europe, educational reforms, and EU-funded projects, emphasizing modernization and the adoption of international standards.
- During Derviş Eroğlu's presidency, the primary themes included educational cooperation with Turkey and increased investments in technical education.
- Mustafa Akıncı's tenure highlighted multiculturalism in education, the peace process, and the promotion of intercommunal dialogue.
- Under Ersin Tatar's administration, national identity and educational integration with Turkey were prominent themes (Olgun, 2020).

Salih Sarpten succinctly describes these discourses as "expressions that ensure the continuity of collective memory and cultural heritage." He further details how each leader's stance on education has led to variations in policy content and implementation, shedding light on the evolution of the TRNC education system.

A comparative analysis of different Presidents' educational discourses reveals that each period has had its own distinct priorities and emphases. While Denktaş's era prioritized national identity and independence, Talat's term focused on educational integration with Europe. Both Eroğlu and Tatar's administrations highlighted close cooperation with Turkey, whereas Akıncı's tenure emphasized peace-oriented narratives and multiculturalism in education.

These differences illustrate how education policies have been shaped by political dynamics over time and how the evolving political landscape of the TRNC has influenced its education system. Presidential discourses have been a key determinant of the direction of education policies, consistently reinforcing the role of education in identity construction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined how the discourses of TRNC Presidents on history, identity, and education have influenced education policies. The findings indicate that political leaders' approaches can directly shape the education system and that education plays a central role in the construction of national identity. While this study highlights the impact of political discourse on education policies in the TRNC, it also encourages discussions on how this process can be anchored in a more scientific and impartial framework in the future.

This research has comprehensively analyzed the influence of TRNC Presidents' statements on education policies. The discourses surrounding identity, history, and education play a significant role in determining the fundamental direction of TRNC education policies. Based on Salih Sarpten's work, it is evident that Presidential discourses and Council decisions together have laid the groundwork for major educational reforms. The future trajectory of education policies will continue to evolve based on internal and external dynamics affecting the TRNC.

The TRNC education system should be shaped within the principles of political independence and scientific neutrality. When developing history curricula, a multi-perspective and scientifically grounded approach should be adopted. It is recommended that TRNC education policies be formulated within a long-term strategic framework, independent of the ideological views of political leaders. While fostering educational cooperation with Turkey, local needs and the educational autonomy of the TRNC should also be taken into consideration.

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