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EARLY EDUCATION IN LITERACY IN TURKEY IN COMPARISON TO THE BALKAN COUNTRIES

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This chapter gives an overview of early literacy education, with a focus primarily on Turkey, but including the Balkan countries as well. The focus is on Turkey as a case study since it plays a critical role bridging Europe and the Middle East. A review of policy and practice in preschool education is provided, along with the key research concerned with early learning outcomes for Turkish children.

The dominant languages used in the Balkan Peninsula stem from three branches: (1) Indo European (including Greek and Albanian) and Slavic (including Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Macedonian); (2) Romance (Romanian and Aromun); and (3) Ural Altaic (Turkish). Latin, Greek and Cyrillic alphabets are in common use. Use of particular languages in the Balkan countries has been influenced by politics, social change and conflicts, whereby related transformations are still ongoing in certain areas. Issues related to settling on language policies and standards, including in cases where Bosnian, Montenegrin, Croatian and Serbian are spoken nationally, has made it difficult to develop early literacy strategies (Greenberg, 2004).

Balkan languages, though coming from diverse language families, share certain typological similarities due to cultural correspondence. This was noted in Trubetzkoy (1928), who referred to relationships between different languages that show similarities in sentence structure and word-formation as constituting 'linguistic areas' (or 'sprachbund' in German) (Friedman, 2011: 276). The Balkan Sprachbund – identified as those languages which have been spoken in the Ottoman Empire since the early Middle Ages – consist of common typological properties, created as a result of a multilingual setting and related contact among diverse languages (Friedman, 2011).

Early literacy

In this section, we review early literacy education in relation to each country’s educational policies. We begin with a focus on Turkey. In the European Union (EU), research in literacy education initiated a shift from the school readiness approach to the adaptation of emergent literacy strategies, dropping the age for the beginning of compulsory education in certain countries. Earlier compulsory education has led to a further set of changes with
Turkey in comparison to the Balkan countries

the objective of creating play-based literacy environments for children to perceive literacy as an extension of their life and play (Tafa, 2008). Maximizing participation in early education has brought with it a set of challenges, including issues related to quality and equity, especially in the case of Turkey. The non-obligatory preschool age dropped to 36 months in 2006. In 2012, mandatory school entry age dropped to 66 months from 72 months. This change was sudden and it did not allow for a smooth transition in terms of curricular planning and adequate teacher training. In regards to literacy development, children without preschool experience had a harder time with certain issues related to literacy, for instance with phonemic awareness (Sert, 2014). The influence of recent research on curriculum required amendments not only for new and experienced teachers but also for education specialists, librarians, policy-makers and monitoring parties. Similar to Russia and India, public educational expenditure relative to gross domestic product (GDP) remained less than 5 per cent in Turkey, gaining the lowest ranks among G20 countries (Eurostat, 2014). While the average time spent in education did rise to 12 years in 2012, drop-out rates in compulsory education are approximately 15 per cent and the average length of schooling for girls is less than five years. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the allocated funds to create the infrastructure to educate young children and meet the objectives for Education for All by 2015 have not been adequate (Cemalcilar and Gökşen, 2014). A new system based on new educational insights has required the hiring of new teachers, building new classrooms, producing educational materials, as well as investing in school libraries and librarians, a set of objectives that was difficult to achieve in a short period of time.

The EU has been instrumental in setting standards among members and candidate states. One of its aims has been to improve the quality of early childhood education, as well as raise participation in early childhood education to 95 per cent by 2015 starting with children aged four. These efforts have been conducted in tandem with similar projects by global non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as UNICEF and the World Bank, and have been undertaken with the acknowledgement that early childhood education plays a role in staving off risks of poverty in the future. EU member and candidate states in Eastern Europe including Turkey have been successful in raising the ratio of participation in preschool education since 2000. The gross enrolment ratio of preschool enrolment in the Balkans is highest in Bulgaria (80 per cent males, 79 per cent females) and lowest in Bosnia Herzegovina (18 per cent males, 17 per cent females) according to the 2008–2012 statistics (UNICEF, 2014). In Turkey, the gross enrolment rate for pre-primary education rose from 6.7 per cent in 2001 to 29.2 per cent in 2011 (Eurostat, 2014). Not surprisingly, recent research confirmed that ‘Turkey has the lowest enrolment rate among the so-called newly industrialized countries’ (Agirdag et al., 2015: 546). According to a recent report by Educational Reform Initiative and ACEV, participation in preschool education has not increased for five-year-olds in Turkey, and has been documented to be about 54 per cent in the 2014–15 academic year, down from 66 per cent in 2011 (Oral et al., 2016).

In early childhood education, especially in Turkey, equity and quality have been key issues of focus. The Tenth Development Plan (2014–18) introduced the Mobile Classroom (for children aged 36–66 months), the Summer Preschool programme (for children aged 60–66 months) and the Project for Increasing Enrolment Rates Especially for Girls (ISEG, 2011–13). The Turkey Country Programme (2006–07) and the Pre-School Education Project (2010–13) are supported by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The Childhood Development and Education Project and the pilot Pre-primary Parent–Child Education Programme Project (1999–2012) were designed to encourage support for parents
in education (OECD, 2013). The rigorous implementations in relation to early literacy education encouraged meaning-construction skills in Turkey. In transforming curricula, a reconsideration of the balance between code-based skills versus meaning-construction skills in early literacy instruction has been triggered with reference to the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA). Studies associate skills tested in PISA with preschool exposure to books and shared reading (OECD, 2013). In the last decade, education as regards to reading has gone through a set of changes. Phonics, as well as meaning-construction strategies, have been introduced. Yet, Turkey’s low scores in PISA in 2009 indicate that meaning-construction skills, which are an indicator of text comprehension, have room for improvement (Blanchy and Şeşmaz, 2011). Despite some improvements between 2003 and 2012, Turkey’s performance in PISA remained one year behind the Organisation for Co-operation and Development (OECD) average with 25 per cent of 15-year-olds not being able to analyse and understand what they read, regarded as ‘functionally illiterate’ by the OECD (Aedo, 2013).

Having one of the top preschool enrolment ratios in Balkans, meaning-making skills could be developed further in Greece as well. In a study by Stellakis (2012) the Greek teachers emphasized the role of multimodal communication in literacy, putting the emphasis on understanding a ‘letter’ as a sound and as a symbol, but they also highlighted the importance of phonemic awareness and phoneme–grapheme correspondence. In other words, the previous approaches to literacy have highlighted phonics instruction as a priority while overlooking the impact of reading for meaning making. Similar to the situation in Turkey, teachers mentioned a lack of adequate knowledge of recent research in this field, noting that training sessions would be beneficial and that meaning-making processes in the classroom could be developed further (Stellakis, 2012).

**Orthographic and phonological representations**

Below we summarize the basic principles of orthographic and associated phonological representation of the key Balkan language(s), mentioning the effects of each in terms of literacy education. A comparative research in consistent and inconsistent orthographies aiming to identify the best predictors of literacy after measuring phoneme awareness, letter knowledge, RAN1 (rapid automated naming) show individual differences are substantial and ‘the same mechanisms are involved in learning to read in any alphabetic orthography’ (Caravolas et al., 2013: 1406). A cross-linguistic study is necessary for understanding literacy growth comparatively, while also enhancing the sharing of language-specific tools, which are crucial in developing solutions that are adequate for all the diverse linguistic contexts of the Balkans and Turkey. Bulgarian, Serbian and Macedonian are all written in the Cyrillic alphabet (Serbian is also written using the Latin alphabet). Turkish, Croatian and Romanian are written in the Latin alphabet while Greek is written in the Greek alphabet. Turkish, Bulgarian, Romanian, Macedonian, Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian have phonemic orthography, where the spelling of the words corresponds transparently to the way they are pronounced which facilitates reading acquisition (Seymour et al., 2003).

Turkish is a verb final SOV (subject, object, verb) language, using a rich set of nominal and verbal inflections to indicate grammatical relations. The Turkish alphabet consists of 29 letters (21 consonants, 8 vowels). Capitalization is utilized at the beginning of sentences as well as for proper nouns. Consonants and vowels are often organized in a CVC (consonant, vowel, consonant) sequence. All syllables have a vowel and cannot start with two consonants, with the exception of certain loanwords (Göksel and Kerslake, 2005). With its
transparent orthography, Turkish has a simple letter–sound relationship, which is supportive of early phonological awareness skills (Öney and Durgunoğlu, 1997). A study by Babayiğit and Stainthorp (2007) suggested that spelling was a more reliable index of phonological processing skills in Turkish since word-level reading skills develop fast. Follow-up research with children aged between 67.7 months and 90.6 months indicated that listening comprehension rather than simple word reading is more influential in predicting meaning-making outcomes in Turkish (Babayiğit and Stainthorp, 2013).

Greek is written in Greek script with 24 letters, using both capital and lower-case letters. Sigma is an exception – it appears as a third case – as it can take on an extra lower-case form. Greek does not have a phonemic orthography. Its word order is SVO, yet in comparison to English, word order can be flexible, and object pronouns tend to precede the verb (Adams, 1987). Investigating syllable and phoneme awareness’s contribution to reading and spelling in Greek (via measures including syllable awareness, phoneme awareness, reading and spelling) showed that students have a tendency to dissect words into syllables (Aidinis and Nunes, 2001). A one-year-long study on Greek indicated that in line with transparent languages (as in the case of Turkish), speech rate was more predictive of reading and spelling skills than RAN (Nikolopoulos, 2006).

**Educational policy in relation to multilingual literacy**

In many of the countries reviewed in this chapter, there are large minorities who are caught between the aspiration of passing on their own ethnic linguistic capacities to new generations and the pragmatics of being able to speak the language of the majority population in the country. The situation has become more complex with the developments in the European Union with regulations about national minorities outlined in the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 2014). In this section, we summarize how this has worked out with regards to Turkey and the minority populations living there. We compare the Turkish case to those of Bulgaria and Macedonia, particularly with regards to efforts regarding the Romani, because the programme was effective and might be employed as a model for other cases.

Since the foundation of the Republic in 1923, Turkish has been the official language of education in Turkey. Educational policies have been mostly reticent in relation to multilingual literacy and language learning. The Kurdish population has, in particular, grappled with the lack of a policy concerning multilingual literacy since Kurdish learning children are exposed to Turkish mostly only after they start primary school (Ceyhan and Koçbaş, 2011). According to recent statistics, resources for children and adults are mostly in Turkish, with some materials available in English. Bilingual books are uncommon, but one notable picture-book series has been created through the International Bilingual Children’s Books Project carried out by Anadolu Kültür in 2011, which has introduced Turkish–Greek, Turkish–Armenian and Turkish–Kurdish bilingual books. There have been many attempts to call for mother-tongue-based education in Turkey (e.g. Derince, 2012), but there has been little progress on the policy level.

Similar to Turkey, there are minority populations living in the Balkan countries. Issues related to language and ethnicity have been debated for nearly two centuries, and the current expectation is to adjust to the globalization trends characterizing the twenty-first century. To give an idea of recent developments in the area, Bulgaria – a country that includes Jewish, Romanian, Turkish, Armenian, Russian and Aromanian minorities – did for a long time not provide support for minority languages. In fact, the Bulgarian state made attempts to change
Ilgım Veryeri Alaca and Aylin C. Küntay

the names of Turkish minorities only in 1984–85. More recently, however, there have been
attempts to draw attention to the need for a curriculum for Turkish children. In 1999,
Bulgaria signed the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, in
support of the country’s accession to the EU (Angelov and Marshall, 2006). A pilot study
successfully introduced Bulgarian to Roma children who were not attending kindergarten.
During this intervention, experts worked with parents at home. They utilized bilingual
methods where information was first introduced in Romani and then translated to Bulgarian.
The project was supported by a book entitled *I Learn Bulgarian* (Kyuchukov, 2006).

Roma minorities have been a disadvantaged group in the Balkans and other parts of
Europe. An absence of kindergartens has been a general problem for Roma communities.
Similar to the Bulgarian case, in Macedonia the ‘Education for Roma children in the year
before starting school’ project helped the children prepare for the primary school while
learning Macedonian. Comprehensive community-based programmes have been emerging
for these communities, for instance in Serbia since 2009 (Macura-Milovanović, 2013). Social
inclusion in the Western Balkans has been an ongoing challenge in Albania, Bosnia and
Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro
and Serbia. A lack of funds and infrastructure have played a critical role in terms of making
it difficult for children to attend school. In Romania, summer kindergarten programmes
were recently introduced to ensure that more children are able to gain a kindergarten experi-
ence before starting primary school. In Macedonia, there are numerous initiatives to help
disadvantaged children and their families, starting from birth through to the age of six. Some
are geared towards parents, and are aimed at building a more educational atmosphere at
home. There are also attempts to include children with special needs in regular schools. The
inclusion project works towards improving the attitudes of parents and people involved with
children requiring special education (UNESCO, 2006).

**Documentation of early learning outcomes**

*Policy implementation in practice*

Levels of policy implementation vary in the Balkans and in Turkey. In this section, we
analyse how national early years policy applies to the curriculum, and draw the lines between
evaluation frameworks and the professional training of early years professionals. Among these
endeavours, monitoring is a continuous work in progress. In general, curriculum assessment
and monitoring school readiness have barely emerged in the region. In Turkey, there is
no nationwide system that would monitor children’s school readiness or keep track of
children’s language development. The Turkish Communicative Development Inventory
(TCDI) has been recently developed to assess language competence of Turkish-speaking
children between the ages of eight months and 36 months (Acarlar et al., 2011). The
programme is for children younger than three years of age, and can be utilized on a more
regular basis to track slow language development in very young children (Aktürk, 2012).
In Albania, the Ministry of Education has approved a set of standards for child development,
yet the extent of its implementation and of monitoring is uncertain. In Macedonia, there is
not a standard test to measure school readiness, but an assessment is practised at age six and
seven, before primary school enrolment. In Romania, by the 2004/2005 school year, 86 per
cent of children would have started school with a preschool experience. Recent policies have
targeted children with a focus on the disadvantaged, such as the Roma minority and children
with special educational needs. Children’s development in Romania is monitored mostly for
Turkey in comparison to the Balkan countries

In 2005, a draft early education programme was adapted by the Ministry of Education (UNESCO, 2006). In Greece, the adoption of a new curriculum in 1999 and an emergent literacy approach in 2003 implemented standards where preschool and first grade teachers evaluated the status of their students using a set of assessment tools. Translation and standardization of the CAP (Concept about Print) observational task, which has also been translated into French, Hebrew, Danish and Slovak, has been found to be useful to understand children’s knowledge of print. CAP evaluates four- to seven-year-olds’ print knowledge via items such as line sequence, letter and word concepts as well as meaning of punctuation (Tafa, 2009).

In terms of policy implementation, a review of the outcomes for the Basic Education Project supported by the World Bank in Turkey reveals that theory surpasses practice. While enrolment rates to pre-primary and primary school have increased, and while teachers with higher education degrees have been hired, and student-centred educational approaches have been adopted, the issues connected to inclusion, equity and participation, as well as critical thinking in the classroom, remain unresolved (McClure, 2014). Similarly, while Educational Childhood Development (ECD) programmes such as ‘parent training’ offered by the Mother and Child Foundation (AÇEV) exist in Turkey, in practice the programme reaches only a limited number of families. In 2009, for instance, it reached only 3 per cent of birth to six-year-old children and their parents. In terms of ECD policies, related legal frameworks and the implementation of programmes, ECD information and a policy focus do exist. However, the coordination and financing of the programmes, and monitoring the quality of this type of intervention, are still work in progress. UNICEF has advised a widespread ECD strategy, setting standards that would be necessary for reaching all children. Such a strategy would need to include the participation of both the private sector and the NGOs (Vegas et al., 2010).

**Principal methods and content areas of literacy instruction**

Against the backdrop of major curriculum changes, we analyse key classroom methods for literacy instruction in Turkey in comparison with the Balkans in this section. Supported by the EU and UNESCO, preschools in Turkey apply emergent literacy support programmes for children from 36 to 66 months of age. The programmes do not teach letters or how to write them; rather, children are encouraged to sing songs, recite rhymes and riddles, play games (e.g. finger games) and read poetry. Teachers are encouraged to carry on discussions with children about picture books that they read together (MoNE, 2013). This approach is continued in the first grade with the Sound Based Sentence Method (SBSM), which was adapted in Turkey between 2004 and 2005 by eliminating the Whole Language Method (which has been used since 1981 and can be linked with Gestalt psychology and the focus on the sentence, followed by words and then the syllable). Since the adaptation was fast, and teachers’ instructional materials did not have adequate examples for each letter of the alphabet, the SBSM method turned out to be challenging for some teachers (Kartal, 2011; Kutluca Canbulat, 2013). The writing curriculum starts with phonemes in the first grade with cursive handwriting, which can be an obstacle for those first graders who did not go through a preschool experience (Babayigit and Kondrali, 2009) but effective for other students who were exposed to emergent writing (Akyol, 2013). Rather than being narrowly focused on just reading and writing, literacy instruction is now linked to listening comprehension and coherent discourse formation in speech, in line with constructivist approaches in learning adapted in 2004.
In Greece, the concept of whole-day kindergartens emerged in 1997–98. In 1999, Greece adapted an emergent literacy perspective rather than reading-readiness in preschools under the National Kindergarten Curriculum in relation to the Language Programme. Literacy activities have been categorized into two areas: teacher-initiated activities and children’s free-choice activities, both of which have been implemented across the whole curriculum. Teacher-initiated activities are information about print (e.g. letter concept, word concept, line sequence, punctuation), phonological awareness (e.g. sentence, word, syllable, phoneme awareness and rhyming), writing activities (e.g. writing names, stories, messages, journal writing) and storybook activities (e.g. reading stories and visiting libraries). Children’s activities on the other hand include playing with letters on a magnetic board, pretend reading to other children and writing during different activities such as music and art (Tafa, 2004). In Macedonia, preschool programmes are flexible, with the non-formal approach supporting the development of the child more holistically (UNESCO, 2006).

**Provision of early literacy for children with special educational needs**

While the question of how to cater for children with special education needs has been debated in the entire Balkan region, each country does not define and treat special populations in the same way. In Turkey, for example, the Special Education Services Regulations of Turkey (SESRT) set the standards in education for children with special educational needs such as visual and hearing impairment, orthopaedic impairment, intellectual disability, autism, emotional and behavioural impairment, as well as gifted and talented children. Speech or language impairments are not listed as disabilities by SESRT. Education has been offered in 122 kindergartens within special education schools and 52 primary schools, where children with mild intellectual disabilities have been placed. Besides these efforts, 66,941 students have been enrolled in primary schools as part of inclusive education, encouraging them to be integral parts of society (Meral and Turnbull, 2014).

**Variety of literacy resources**

Literacy resources are of key importance for nurturing early reading and writing skills. A recent study carried out in Turkey indicated that literacy materials can compensate for limited language skills for children at risk of developing language difficulties (Baydar et al., 2014). Quality literacy materials are accessed by the privileged middle class and rich families in Turkey, but not others, leading to gaps between children from high and low social economic groups (Alonso, 2010). The social infrastructure that could support children from low social economic backgrounds with literacy materials, and which should include children’s libraries and the children’s section of public libraries, is not currently sufficient. The population of Turkey as of 2013 is estimated to be 76,667,864. In Turkey there is one national library, 1,118 public libraries (1,367 in 2004 – the number is thus declining) and 533 university libraries (there were 242 in 2004, thus a marked increase). The number of registered members to the libraries is 1,025,846; the number of registered children members to libraries is 479,207. Approximately, 243 publishers are interested in publishing children’s books (TÜİK, 2013).

In Turkey, the MoNE (Ministry of National Education) offers a centralized system that decides about education as well as about textbooks, including their printing and distribution. Some other institutions such as UNICEF Turkey and AÇEV are key players in the development of early literacy in Turkey. With the preschool act, there is an increasing effort to make a variety of literacy materials available. One of these efforts has been *Cotton Candy,*
Turkey in comparison to the Balkan countries

A workbook that teaches children about basic shapes, numbers and colours. While education focuses on the student and encourages active engagement with literacy materials, and should be supportive of teachers to utilize libraries, the presence of libraries, especially rich ones with picture books, is scarce (MoNE, 2009). The Z-libraries (enriched libraries) project, run by MoNE, reorganized approximately 400 libraries, reflecting on the need for engaging spaces and resources in schools, including preschools. Z-libraries may be able to gain further momentum with the hiring of active school librarians and developing book collections based on contemporary titles.

There have been some attempts to integrate information and communication technologies (ICT) into the primary school system through the Basic Education Project (BEP) and the FATIH Project. Much of these funds, however, were spent on the hardware rather than effective teaching software programmes. The effective use of tablets in education, which would require the development of compatible interactive curriculum, adequate in-service training and the monitoring of ICT integration, has not been sufficiently realized. Lack of internet access accompanied with restrictions implemented on tablets has reduced their initial capacity as a new mode of instruction (Akcaoglu et al., 2014).

Major challenges for current and future early literacy provision

The rapid change in policies at the beginning of the twenty-first century in early literacy education has not been sufficient in terms of reaching all children, parents and teachers. Implementations in the education system, bridging research and practice, establishing effective teacher-training programmes, creating diverse literacy materials and introducing student-centred educational models, as well as making good use of technological innovations, would benefit from further improvement. In the case of Turkey, lack of awareness on the part of most parents about early literacy in connection with a lack of a literacy environment at home and in the social environment of the child is a major obstacle. Current mandates such as cursive writing in the first grade is often challenging for the children, and has the unintended side effect of decreasing children’s interest in literacy activities (Akman and Aşkin, 2012; Babayiğit, 2013). An important question is how to create a vision for literacy teaching with an interdisciplinary group of scholars and teachers who can closely work with the decision-makers. While MoNE plays a centralized role in Turkey, input by other stakeholders (NGOs, the private sector) could be beneficial in terms of jumpstarting literacy and encouraging children to recognize the joy of reading. Recent research indicates key challenges for Turkey: monitoring by ECE experts, the cost of new teachers and developing literacy materials for an expanding curriculum (Vegas et al., 2010). The alarming gap that needs to be covered in relation to literacy calls for a considerable effort.

The obstacles for current and future early literacy provision in Turkey and the Balkans are extensive. In general, a sustainable system that introduces policy-makers as well as families and teachers to current international research, including literacy research methodologies and new multimodal literacies such as information literacy and visual literacy, would contribute to effective literacy education in the countries discussed in this chapter. An emerging sense of children’s school readiness accompanied with longitudinal tests should be expanded to evaluate the efficiency of existing programmes. Research in relation to language development and literacy ought to be tied more strongly to literacy education. Tools to develop country-specific tests, standards and literacy materials are necessary, since the structure of each language system is unique. Comparative data from recent research can bridge knowledge and expertise in language learning and early literacy. The benefit of taking into account those
most in need, such as children who require special education as well as refugee children, should be better understood by policy-makers and those who implement government guidelines. Failing to do so exacerbates the problem of policies not being implemented in practice and of running programmes that do not reach a broad spectrum of children. Lastly, inclusive education and minority issues are major challenges that require attention.

Notes

1 RAN is naming familiar symbols such as pictures, letters and numbers and it is a significant indicator of reading development (De Jong 2011).
2 8130 books: 7507 Turkish, 481 English, 32 Arabic, 15 German and 95 other (TÜİK, 2013).
3 The number of kindergartens in Greece rose from 160 in 1997–1998 to 1323 in 2001–2002 supported by Greek Law 2525, which promotes preschool education geared towards children aged four to six (Tafa, 2004).
4 Supported by EU and UNICEF, 1,131,082 copies of the Cotton Candy workbook have been printed and distributed nationally by MoNE as an education material under the project Supporting Preschool Education, 2014.

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