

An Evaluation on the Changing Educational Policies and Socio-political Rituals in Turkey

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- Socio-political rituals appear more densely within the educational process of primary schools, rather than at later stages of education.
- The first fifteen years after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey (1923-1938) was very productive in terms of inventing educational rituals.
- The effect of policies on the daily lives of primary schools can be followed most distinctively through the Student Pledge.
- In Turkey in 2012, essential changes in the form of festival celebrations were made.
- In order for rituals to be effective, they first need to be legitimate in the eyes of the teacher.

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the socio-political rituals such as national festivals and student pledges have changed in the Turkish Republic primary schools over the last twenty years.

Method: The data used to achieve this purpose was collected from four different sources; the applicable legislation, statements of policymakers, teacher organizations and an interview with primary school class teachers.

Findings: Developments in politics have affected both the daily life and the celebration of special occasions in primary schools considerably. Abolishing the Student Pledge which took place in 2013 can be regarded as the most important alteration in the everyday life of the school since the foundation of the Turkish Republic. The most significant change in the celebration of special occasions in primary schools was made in 2012, and was ostensibly to free the marking of these festivals from their militaristic framework. However, a knock-on effect of this change appeared to be a waning of enthusiasm for such festivals in general. After the failed coup attempt on 15th July 2016, Turkey announced the 15th July Democracy and National Unity Day. During the first week of the school year, activities are carried out for this day.

Keywords:

School rituals, socio-political rituals, national festivals, student pledge

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1 Introduction

School is often understood primarily as the place where young people learn the skills and knowledge needed for them to go into the job market and provide for themselves in adulthood. However, since the birth of modernity, public schools have also played a primary role in socialising the future citizens of the nation. This duty, which in the past was performed primarily by familial and religious institutions, has passed on to state schools and education institutions in today's modern society and this shift in responsibility has gifted the governing classes a highly effective and important tool for maintaining their existence. According to Bernstein, Elvin, Peters, & Huxley (1966, p.429), the education a school provides transmits two cultures: instrumental and expressive. The primary purpose is to divide the society into professions and thus make it heterogeneous by transmitting the *instrumental culture*, which includes specific academic and professional skills to provide the necessary workforce. The second purpose is to unify the society and thus make it homogeneous by transmitting the *expressive culture*, which includes the norms and values which legitimize the dominant system, protect the governing order and provide social solidarity.

In transmitting the expressive culture, the norms and values that are cast as part of the wider national character are frequently defined by the ideology of the current government among states who exert great control over their state education systems. Additionally, textbooks, curriculums, national-official festivals and pledges come to have great socio-political importance. The official discourse that influences both the overt and the more covert curriculum transmitted in public schools helps form individual students' understanding of their role and position within society. Through the official/open curriculum, a student learns the history of the nation, and the superiority and uniqueness of this history, how to understand it and the rights and duties s/he has as a citizen.

National festivals have a special importance in transmitting the expressive culture. Jean Jacques Rousseau, who set the philosophical foundations for the concept of the modern nation-state, recommended creating civil festivals to strengthen the national character and to provide a channel to concentrate society's emotions into a new, national, energy (Kertzer, 1988, p.153). His words were later supported by Emile Durkheim (2005), who stated that participating in national festivals reduced the social barriers that separate people from each other in everyday life and help to provide social solidarity among citizens (p.413). Thus, national festivals mark events important to the nation and celebrate special days when all citizens feel themselves as part of the nation, regardless of which religious group, ethnicity or social class they come from. In addition to such events, more regular rituals embedded into the routine of the school, such as pledges of national allegiance which are recited everyday, are the symbolic performances that help provide a child with an emotional bond to abstract concepts, such as government and nation. Such acts are performed in an environment which reinforces the naturalness of such rituals so that students come to enact them almost unconsciously, and the capacity for any questioning or resistance is greatly limited. In creating a consent-based national unity and order of loyalty, the government benefits considerably from such socio-political rituals such as festivals and pledges.

The period of 1875-1914 is defined as the age which saw primary schools become sites of ideological power in terms of nation-building in many European countries (Hobsbawm, 1987, p.149). In this age, primary school education became compulsory in many countries, and states began to marshal various ideological strategies in order to teach children how to become good citizens (Alexander, 2001, p.16). The foundations for this were established after the dissolution of absolute monarchy in France in 1789, when the socio-political power of national events, particularly those celebrating military victories such as France's July 14 Bastille Day, came to be realised (Kertzer, 1988, p.157). At the same time, years of war, internal conflicts and the idea of the citizen-soldier also helped to integrate a military aspect into the developing symbol of the national citizen. This military turn was also evident in school life, as semi-military conditions were imposed on the school and military thought began to become part of school life. Thus the space left by religious colleges of the *ancient regimes* was filled with a military understanding (Ariès, 1962, p.255–256).

Military developments had a tremendous effect on the spread of uniformity, order and uniforms in schools, with the notion of a citizen soldier gaining sway across the whole of Europe. Days of national celebration ballooned, with military victories and royal birthdays celebrated, and portraits and symbols began to be hung in schools (Hobsbawm, 1983, p.271–277). According to Eric Hobsbawm, by the early twentieth century, the imperial role of the British public schoolboy was fundamentally a sacrificial one with the primary purpose of a public school education to produce the 'neo-imperial warrior'. In 1904, Empire Day Festival was invented. This festival was equivalent to Bastille Day in France and Sedan Day in Germany (English, 2006; Mangan, 2010). However, perhaps the most developed rituals of an imperial education were not European but Japanese. In 1888, Japan's Ministry of Education instructed schools to conduct celebratory ceremonies on 'three great holidays', New Year (1 January), National Foundation Day (11 February), and the Emperor's Birthday (3 November) (Cave, 2016, p.13). Two years later the *Imperial Rescript on Education* was published, a pledge intended for recitation which emphasized dedication to the continuity of the Empire and the loyalty of the Japanese people. Copies of this Rescript were distributed to every school in Japan, and were hung near the Emperor's portrait (Tsunoda, De Bary, & Keene, 1964, p.139). Reciting the Imperial Rescript, raising the national flag (Hinomaru) and performing a march (Kimigayo) were incorporated into regular school ceremonies, the emphasis of which was on celebrating the infinity of the empire (Passin, 1965, p.308; Takato, 2004, p. 207–208).

Like all other empires, the Ottoman Empire was affected by the fact of nationalism and militarism brought by the wars of the nineteenth century. Militarist and nationalist elements entered the Ottoman education system at the beginning of the twentieth century, with the impending dissolution of the empire threatened on its many fronts intensifying the development of the citizen soldier [millet-i müselleha] mentality. Especially during the First World War, military drills, physical education, war games and scouting activities became an integral part of education at every school level with paramilitary youth organisations also becoming popular during this period (Yamak Ateş, 2012, p. 99-101). Militarist and nationalist features were also strengthened through changes to the curriculum and, as of 1909, *July 10*, the day when the Ottoman Constitution was enacted was made a national festival. This was

the first official holiday adopted by the Turkish parliament in the empire's history (Taş, 2002, p.352).

On April 23, 1920 the Grand National Assembly of Turkey [Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (TBMM)] was founded. With the proclamation of the Republic on October 29, 1923, the Ottoman State of six hundred years was replaced with the Turkish Republic. Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) (1881-1938) became the first President of the Republic of Turkey. Ataturk had a pioneering role in making several revolutions to raise Turkey to the level of contemporary civilizations. Ataturk introduced a broad range of reforms in the political, social, legal, economic, and cultural spheres. Abolition of the Sultanate; proclamation of the Turkish Republic; abolition of the Caliphate; unification of education; adoption of the new Turkish alphabet are some of these reforms. The basis on which today's Republic of Turkey is built was largely structured in the time of Ataturk.

The first fifteen years after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey (1923-1938) was more productive in terms of inventing educational rituals and while some educational rituals that were invented during this period have undergone various changes, they have survived to the present day. In the intervening period between the founding of the Republic and now, text books and curriculums have been revised, but the national festivals are regarded as having a static structure, as they have become integral symbols of the nation's existence. Nevertheless, because such festivals are ideologically structured, they have undergone changes in terms of their practice and discourse, as the governments of Turkey have changed.

In the last twenty years, the Republic of Turkey has experienced important social, economic and political changes. Therefore this paper intends to chart the changes in the Turkish Republic's primary schools by focusing on the evolution of the socio-political rituals such as national festival celebrations and the Student Pledge.

Socio-political rituals appear more densely within the educational process of primary schools, rather than at later stages of education. Easton and Hess (1962, p. 103, 238) compare early political orientations to religious feelings and emphasize that they are stronger than the academic structure of the school. This shows that, although not on a cognitive level, rituals wield a potent emotional power over primary school-age students. The main socio-political rituals mentioned in this paper are; the Student Pledge [Andımız], the 23rd of April, the 15th of July, and the Week of the Holy Birth [Kutlu Doğum Haftası]. The Student Pledge was an important socio-political ritual which was continuously carried out as part of the ordinary primary school day between 1933-2013. The 23rd of April is an official festival for the foundation of Turkey's Grand National Assembly, celebrated since from the earliest years of the Republic as Ataturk's gift for the children. On the 15th of July, the failure of the coup attempt is celebrated. The Week of the Holy Birth celebrates the birth of the Prophet Mohammed, which the Justice and Development Party [Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP)] brought to schools as part of its policy to raise a religious generation.

The information about the changes in the socio-political rituals in primary schools is gathered from different sources. Firstly, the relevant legislation was reviewed and developments in practice were determined. Then, in order to understand the source of motivation for such

changes, and the reactions of the opposition, the statements of relevant policy makers were examined. In assessing present day attitudes to these rituals, and to learn what teachers think and what is being discussed regarding this topic in the staff room, five primary school class teachers were interviewed. The teachers interviewed were selected from those who have over twenty years of experience in public schools. In addition, the statements of teacher organizations on the subject, the announcements they made from their websites and the reports they wrote have been examined.

2 Effects of the changing education policies on ordinary school days

The socio-political rituals of a state school are mainly shaped according to governmental and educational policies. In the early years of the Turkish Republic, founded on the 29th of November 1923, the air of democracy was dominant. The main purpose was to build a national, modern, democratic, Western and secular educational system. However, because the founding members thought a new war was imminent, military lessons taught by officers alongside basic military training camps were brought into schools as of 1926. Until the end of the Second World War, the aim of raising a military spirit in schools, which had provided civil education earlier, gradually became more and more integral to Turkish education.

Turkey moved on to a multi-party system in 1945. However, before democracy was fully established, the regime was interrupted 1960 by a military coup in 1960, followed by a succession on military interventions in 1971, 1980 and 1997. Education was greatly impacted by this process. In the 1990s, Turkey was ruled by a series of coalition governments and went through political and economic difficulties, but nevertheless, at the European Summit held in Helsinki in December 1999, the European Union acknowledged Turkey as a candidate country for accession to the block and the political negotiations started. Potential EU accession engendered a wave of thorough political reforms between 1999-2005, in order to comply with the harmonization packages, but the direct effects on educations were marginal, as the process focused more on democratization and human rights issues. After 2005, Turkey shifted its EU policy and began to move away from the accession process.

2002 saw significant changes to the educational system with the coming to power of the AKP government. Throughout the tenure of the AKP, which defines its political position as democratic conservatism, education has continued to be a target area where many of the cornerstone policies of the government have been produced. Concepts of democratisation alongside conservatism, the lenses through which the party defines itself, have become the most debated concepts in the country. All the changes made in the pursuit of the democratisation of the education system have been carried out within the frame of conservatism. This drive is open and conscious, as expressed by then Prime Minister, now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in a meeting with a provincial chairman, who explained clearly “[w]e want to raise a religious generation”, summarising the education policy of the AKP (Dindar bir gençlik yetiştirmek istiyoruz [We want to raise a religious youth], 1 February [Şubat], 2012).

As of 2004, Values Education is included in the school curriculum in this pursuit to foster a religious generation. The Ministry of Education [Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı (MEB)] demanded that Values Education activities to be carried out in the first week of the school year as of 2010-2011 academic year and religious values and figures were chosen to forefront the move. At the same time, the number of Islamic schools [İmam Hatip] increased. Together with the already compulsory Religion and Ethics Education for high school students, options such as Koranic study, classes on the life of the Prophet Mohammed and Basic Religious Knowledge were added to the curriculum under the name of Religion, Ethics and Values. The demand for Religion and Ethics classes to teach Religion, Ethics and Values teachers increased substantially and a substantial expansion in the number of Religious Education teachers took place (Meşeci Giorgetti, 2016).

The policy to raise a religious generation also took effect in the daily life of schools. In 2013, MEB made new arrangements on the regulation of secondary schools and stated that a suitable place could be provided upon request to meet the needs of religious service at schools (MEB ortaöğretim kurumları yönetmeliği [MEB secondary schools regulation] (07 Eylül [September], 2013). With this arrangement, opening place of worship at schools became optional and religious rituals were brought into schools. In the meantime, uniform in schools was abolished in the name of democratisation. However, the most radical change was made in 2014, when the regulation on the restriction of female students in secondary schools and high schools wearing head-scarves was abolished (Meşeci Giorgetti, 2016). Thus, another step on the road to conservative democratisation was taken.

This overview of the changing education policies of Turkey since the founding of the republic charts the shifting priorities of the national government, beginning with the concept of producing national soldier-citizens to the raising of a religious generation. Since 2009, the concept of the solution process, with a view to solving tensions in the Eastern regions of the country, has also entered Turkish politics, and this has also had an impact on the Turkish education system. This solution process involves the disarmament of Kurdish Workers Party (Partiye Karkerên Kurdistanê [PKK]), which undertook its first terrorist attack in 1984 and has since caused the deaths of 40.000 people. It has also focused on strengthening social integration and an acknowledgement of the Kurdish problem by the Turkish Republic (Terörün sona erdirilmesi [Law on the elimination of terror], 10 Temmuz [July], 2014). The solution process remains complex and the PKK have continued with terrorist attacks. However, concepts such as multiculturalism, pluralism and identity politics have begun to make themselves felt in terms of education policy. In 2013, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan, announced a Democratization Package for speedy implementation in schools. The package included steps to erase the legacy of the military coups from the Turkish education system and pave the way for education in different languages and dialects; the removal of the ban on headscarves in public; and abolishing the student pledge from primary schools (Demokratikleşme Paketi'nin içeriği [The contents of the democratization package], 30 Eylül [September], 2013). The effect of these policies on the daily lives of primary schools can be followed most distinctively through the Student Pledge.

Since its implementation, the Student Pledge had been an untouchable socio-political ritual due to its militarist statements and essentialist expressions about being a Turk. It was brought into Turkish primary schools in 1933 and had been an established part of the school day ever since. Reşit Galip, the Minister of Education of the time, wrote the Pledge and put it into practice on the 23rd of April 1933.



Picture 1: Reşit Galip for the first time reciting the Student Pledge (24 Nisan [April], 1933).

The Pledge is as follows: "I am a Turk, I am honest, I am hardworking. My law is to protect my minors and respect my elders and to love my country and nation more than I love myself. My ideal is to rise and progress. I offer my existence to the Turkish existence as a gift!" (Meşeci Giorgetti, 2015). The first alteration of the Pledge was made in the period when Turkey was being ruled by supra-party governments, during the period intervening the military coup on the 12th of March 1971 and the elections held on the 14th of October 1973. In this period, the emphasis of Atatürk was added to the pledge and it followed: "Oh the provider of our days, Great Atatürk; I vow to walk forever and ever on the path you opened and follow the ideals you established, missions you indicated. Happy is the one who says I am a Turk." (İlkokul yönetmeliği [Primary school regulation], 29 Ağustos [August], 1972).

In 2003, the obligation for foreign students to recite the Student Pledge was abolished. Nobody laid too much emphasis on this change. However, by 2010, as the government began to look for ways to resolve the Kurdish situation, the content and obligatory nature of the Pledge was beginning to be questioned. The Minister of Education at the time, Nimet Çubukçu

criticised the content of the Pledge due to its essentialist expressions (Bakan Nimet Çubukçu'ya “ant” sorusu [“Pledge” question to Minister Nimet Çubukçu], 15 Şubat [February], 2010). The obligation to recite the Pledge every morning in schools was abolished in 2013 under new regulations. (MEB ilköğretim kurumları [MEB primary schools], 8 Ekim [October], 2013). Nevertheless, this change brought protest from opposition political party organizations and nationalist unions (Eylemler başladı [Protest actions started], 2 Ekim [October], 2013). Erdoğan responded to these protests, by saying “[i]n no developed countries in the world can you see texts with racist slogans read by children lined up like soldiers,” and reaffirmed his support for the abolition (Erdoğan 'andımız' [Erdogan 'pledge'], 8 Ekim [October], 2013). However, a widespread backlashes ensued, with various organizations gathering in protest in town squares to recite the Student Pledge (Dünkü çocuklar [Born yesterday], 11 Kasım [November], 2015).



Picture 2: Ünye's Born Yesterday group recited the Student Pledge at the Dolmabahçe Palace (11 Kasım [November], 2015).

In this [video](#), you can watch one of these protest which organized by Nilüfer Municipality in Bursa. Some schools formed their own pledge, including the private school Taş Mekteb (Taş School), whose school board asked to Ataol Behramoğlu, a well-known Turkish poet to write a student pledge. Behramoğlu wrote a pledge which gives an emphasis on the concepts of equality, justice, liberty, and the legacy of Atatürk, and the pledge was adopted by the students in the school (Dündar, 2018).

Five years after the abolition of the Pledge, there was a significant development. Türk Eğitim-Sen, a well-known educational union with nationalist tendencies, filed a lawsuit with the Council of State requesting cancellation of the Student Pledge repeal. In response, the Council of State annulled the provision that had previously abolished the Student Pledge, justifying their decision by stating that the concepts and principles contained in the Student Pledge and that had been recited in primary schools for generations were the concepts and principles on which Turkey's Constitution is based, and that within the Pledge was contained the primary

purpose of the Turkish Educational System. The Council of State emphasized that this pledge strengthened the notion of national belonging within young generations on the basis of constitutional citizenship and that it contributed to the formation of moral and ethical values in students. The Council of State also stated that the abolition of the Student Pledge would only be possible if it was based on a lawful scientific justification (Danıştay [The Council of State], 19 Ekim [October], 2018).

Upon this decision, the media started to publish news that the Student Pledge had returned to schools. MEB stated that the decision was not finalized; the legal process continued and then MEB gave an 11-page appeal petition to the Council of State to overturn the decision. The petition argued that Turkish national identity was formed too late when compared to other national identities and the Student Pledge was necessary in 1933 in order to build the Turkish national identity. But today Turkey does not need the Pledge. The appeal also argued that the Pledge was anachronistic, and that such rituals were most commonly seen in fascist or communist regimes, that students parroted the Pledge rather than speaking it meaningfully and that the dictation of monolithic ideas was not appropriate for the education of the 2000s (İşte Milli Eğitim [Here National Education], 12 Kasım [November], 2018).

This petition was debated in the Turkish public sphere for a substantial amount of time, but more significantly, caused conflict between the AKP and the Nationalist Movement Party [Milliyetçi Hareket Partisinin (MHP)] which had been cooperating in national elections under the name of the Republican Alliance [Cumhur İttifakı]. The leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, in particular was vociferous in his reaction to the petition, asking “[w]hat is the problem of the pledge? Which part of pledge offends your sensibilities? Is it a crime to say I am a Turk? Is it wrong to say I am honest? Is it heedlessness to be hardworking? [...] This country is called the Republic of Turkey; the people lives in it are called Turk. The Student Pledge is one of the distinctive features of our national identity. If you dislike it, quiet down.” (Bahçeli’den ‘öğrenci andı’ çıkışı [Pledge indignation from Bahçeli], 20 Ekim [October], 2018). Other opposition leaders made similar criticisms. The most severe response to the petition given by MEB came again from MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli. He said that, "to consider Turks as a people who reached national consciousness the latest is a denial of history, the neglect of history, the betrayal of history." Bahçeli, however, did temper his message somewhat by opening up a path for reconciliation with the AKP, remarking that "we want to believe that our Minister of Education has not seen the petition of appeal or that he did not examine it carefully because of his intensity". In a further twist then, AKP spokesman Ömer Çelik released a statement arguing that the petition did not reflect the opinion of the AKP and MEB, and that the petition is both historically and morally incorrect.

In the days following this press release, the General Director of MEB’s Legal Services Department and the two lawyers who filed the petition were dismissed (Kemalistler ve Bahçeli istedi [Kemalists and Bahçeli wanted], 14 Kasım [November], 2018). The Ministry re-submitted the petition to the Council of State, with previous references such as "parroting", "anachronistic", and the comments made on the national identity of Turks removed. However the controversy continues, with Türk Eğitim-Sen, the union that opened the case to the Ministry of National Education, wanting the ministry to withdraw the appeal application

completely, rather than merely amending its petition, and for the Student Pledge to be reinstated once again in schools (Türk Eğitim-Sen, 2018). Not every education union agrees with this position, with Eğitim Bir-Sen, the education union known for its closeness to the conservative policies of the AKP government defining the Pledge as the product of a reactionary, repressive, militarist, totalitarian mentality and supporting its abolition as an important achievement in the name of civil peace and reconciliation (Eğitim Bir-Sen, 2018). Eğitim-Sen, another education union with democratic and left-wing affiliations, approaches the situation differently as a crisis deliberately engineered by the AKP in order to create the perception that "Turkey has an independent judiciary". According to this union, any discussions on the Pledge in absence of an appropriate democratic environment in which to have them will necessarily remain superficial (Eğitim Sen, 2018).

While all these discussions were taking place, it was claimed that MEB sent a circular to all schools. Allegedly, MEB requested that the Student Pledge not be recited and that teachers should not be talk about this subject in schools (Andımız'la ilgili [about the Pledge], 6 Aralık [December], 2018). However, MEB denounced these allegations as untrue (MEB öğrenci andıyla ilgili [MEB about student pledge], 8 Aralık [December], 2018).

One way of understanding the effect of the abolition of the Student Pledge on the ordinary school day and the teaching process is to listen to teachers. In this regard, it is instructive to know what is being discussed in the teachers' room and what the teachers think about the Pledge. To this end, five class teachers were interviewed individually in a primary school in Istanbul. All teachers interviewed have more than twenty years of professional experience. Admittedly five teacher's thoughts cannot be taken as representative of all the teachers in Turkey. However, access to the perspective of experienced teachers is important in terms of expanding our knowledge pool regarding the controversy over the Pledge.

All five class teachers who were interviewed for this paper were in agreement with the policymakers and had parallel views about the content of the Pledge having problems. They all expressed concerns over the Pledge being perceived as "imposing being a Turk" and as not having "an inclusive content". Further, all teachers agreed that there was value in morning ceremonies in schools and felt that some kind of student pledge should be recited. They emphasised that when there was trouble either within the school or in the wider society, the Pledge played an important role in unifying students in their emotional attachment to the notion of the country and what it represents, and helped increase the awareness of students to wider issues of solidarity and a sense of united purpose. Interestingly, while the literature regarding school pledges focuses on their socio-political function and significance, the teachers expressed that it had many different functions within the daily routine of the school. We can categorise the statements of the teachers regarding the functions of the Pledge in the following ways: rewarding; supporting self-confidence and instilling student discipline.

In terms of the structure, recitation of the Pledge tended to be according to students' school identity numbers. Everyday a student recited the Pledge on the stand and other students repeated after him/her. However, in some cases, teachers would interrupt the routine in order to recognise student success by giving them the honour of leading other students in the reciting of the Pledge that day. Additionally, if a student struggled with speaking in public, that

student was given more opportunities to recite the Pledge as one method to help standing to help them overcome their shyness. In this way, the Pledge offers a tool for teachers to both reward and develop confidence in their students.

However, all five teachers expressed that the most important function of the Pledge according to the teachers was its effect on school discipline. According to the teachers, starting a school day with a pledge gives the school a sense of formality, encourages and accelerates the process of students putting on their student identity cards and helps prepare them for the day. Teachers regard morning ceremonies and the Pledge as important elements to ensure students came to school on time. Here a teacher puts emphasis especially on the Turkish culture and argues that “people should be kept within certain limits in Turkish culture”. The loss of these more practical functions of the Pledge maybe the most significant major consequence of its abolition, and is one that policymakers are unlikely to have foreseen. Teachers state that the abolition of the Pledge and, consequently, the morning ceremonies as a whole, have weakened school discipline and caused students to be late for lessons. Therefore, we can say that alterations made for political purposes have engendered potentially problematic changes in the daily routine of the school.

3 Effects of changing education policies on special school days

One can follow the changes made in governmental and educational policies by looking at the marking of the special celebration days and the activities carried out on those days. As mentioned above, the democratisation of Turkey aimed at scaling down the militarist elements in education. The National Security course, which was the most prominent example of militarist education, was abolished in the academic year 2012-2013. Another important step taken to scale down the elements of the militarist education was the changes to be made for special days like national festivals.

Turkish Republic primary schools put excessive emphasis on the 23rd April festival. The day the Grand National Assembly of Turkey was founded, the 23rd April was legally designated a national festival in 1921. Dedicated to the children of the nation by Atatürk, this festival was named the *Children’s Festival* in 1929, the *National Sovereignty Festival* in 1935 and *National Sovereignty and Children’s Festival* in 1981. The first 15 years of the Republic was key in establishing Turkey’s national festivals. However, military coups in 1960 and 1980 meant that these festivals progressively began adopting a militarist framework. As militaristic discourse entered the curriculum and the wording of the Student Pledge, it also began influence the ways in which special days came to be celebrated. A moment of silence practiced in official ceremonies during national festivals, national songs and parades with marching bands, long speeches, soldiers and military schools are at the forefront. Marching parades, marching bands, the content of the poems recited, alongside the solemnity and discipline with which events take place are all intended to invoke the notion of the citizen soldier. In addition to these official ceremonies, each school has its own activity and individual ceremony. During the week of the 23rd of April, classrooms in primary schools are decorated with visuals about the festival, students write compositions and memorise poems, and the ceremonies held on these

special celebration days and the process of preparation are regarded as important opportunities to cultivate and strengthen national feelings in students. The symbolism of the citizen soldier is especially dominant. The dominant military structure of national holidays in Turkey can be viewed from this [video](#) from 23 April 1967.

With a regulation published in Turkey in 2012, essential changes in the form of these festival celebrations were made and official state ceremonies held in festivals were changed entirely. Local authorities were given the right to organize both the national and official ceremonies, and official ceremonies, parades and stadium shows were abolished. The presence of soldiers was withdrawn from festival celebrations (Ulusal ve Resmi Bayramlar [National and Official Holidays], 5 Mayıs [May], 2012). This impetus behind this regulation was stated to have been the distancing of official festival activities from a standardised frame and to encourage diversification in their celebration, free them from their legacy of militaristic influence and make them more participatory enabling large numbers of people to participate in them. Thus, the school principal was given the initiative to organize the way in which the celebration of national festivals was performed at each individual school.

These changes in the regulation were expressed differently within different schools. Data collected during the interviews highlighted that the province of the school, parents, the personal wishes of the school principal and the teaching body became important parameters in governing each individual school's celebration. The results were mixed. Some schools enjoyed the chance to influence celebrations and started preparing enthusiastically and in a more participatory manner, involving local authorities, the school, teachers and parents in the process. However, for other schools, according to our interviewees, the aura and prestige surrounding their celebration began to diminish with some insensitive and reluctant principals started not attending celebrations unless their staff put pressure on them. Thus while some schools compelled the school administration to have elaborate celebrations, in others some teachers began to pass over them.

Teachers stated that the most important reason the 23rd of April celebrations lacked enthusiasm was that the 23rd of April Children's Day coincided with the Week of the Holy Birth celebrations which overshadowed the 23rd of April celebrations. The Week of the Holy Birth, which celebrates the birth of Prophet Mohammed, became a special event in 1989 but came to be celebrated in schools as of 2010 within the framework of AKP's policy to raise a religious generation. It was included in the work calendar of schools as of 2015. All schools started holding religious composition and poem-writing competitions, quiz shows, competitions reciting the Koran and the call to prayer (azan) and memorising the words of Mohammed.

Religious books were also distributed. While the 1989 celebration had conformed the Islamic calendar, the week began to be celebrated according to the Gregorian calendar as of 1994 with the date determined to lie between 20-26 April. In 2008, the date was adjusted Presidency of Religious Affairs [Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı] to fall between the 14-20 April. While the Islamic calendar typically loses 11 days each year, bringing the religious celebrations such as Ramadan and Eid progressively earlier in the year, it is not usual in the Islamic world to celebrate specific religious days according to the Gregorian calendar. Nevertheless, stabilising celebrations of the Week of the Holy Birth to coincide with Children's Day, again, which marks

the foundation of the secular Grand National Assembly of Turkey by Atatürk, has been perceived as a reaction against Atatürk and the Republic by the ruling AKP.



Picture 3: Holy Birth program in a Primary School (25 Nisan [April], 2015).

When we look at how this coincidence played out in schools, unsurprisingly this situation caused a war of rituals amongst the teachers and created conflict. Teachers stated that the Week of the Holy Birth celebrations have over the past eight years come to overshadow, the 23rd of April Children's Day celebrations with the more established festival neglected and old traditions, such as the widespread visual presence of Atatürk, eschewed in favour over the religious celebration. Some of the teachers reported their discomfort with the new arrangements, and emphasized that even though they mentioned the Week of the Holy Birth in their lessons, they never let it overshadow the 23rd of April. The contrary was also true, with some teachers giving weight to the 23rd of April Children's Day celebrations. Thus this development in student celebrations seems to have caused conflict among teachers at schools, dividing them in terms of personal compulsions.

Based on the teachers' interviews, this conflict has to a large extent been resolved, largely in due to the sense of solidarity that came in the wake of the events of 15th July 2016. A coup was attempted by members of a religious cult, enemies of Atatürk, the Republic and of secularism, who had managed to establish themselves in key positions of both government and military, and were aiming to overthrow the existing government. In response, the public, the police and military forces not belonging to this group blocked this coup attempt, and 248 people who went out on the streets in defence lost their lives (Dakika dakika darbe girişimi [Minutes of the coup attempt], 16 Temmuz [July], 2016). Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of Republican People's Party, [Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (CHP)] the main opposition party of Turkey, claimed that the government had previous knowledge about the plan but chose not to prevent the coup (Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan çarpıcı [Stunning from Kılıçdaroğlu], 5 Nisan [April], 2017). After the events of 15th July, this cult was announced a terrorist organization.

It emerged that the stabilisation of Holy Birth Week celebrations to the Gregorian calendar that coincided with the 23rd of April Children's Day week in schools was a project of this

terrorist organization. Therefore Holy Birth Week celebrations on April abolished. According to new regulation, the celebrations of Prophet Mohammed's birthday were named Mevlid-i Nebi and the celebrations started to be made according to the Muslim calendar (12th of Rebiulevvel) (Kutlu Doğum Haftası [Holy Birth Week], 29 Ekim [October], 2017).

Following the coup attempt, a new socio-political ritual in schools emerged. In the very first week of the 2016-2017 academic year, just a couple of months after the failed attempt a detailed activity programme similar to the other national and official festivals with the theme "15th July Victory of Democracy and Martyrs' Day" was released by the Ministry of Education, giving instructions to all education institutions, both formal and informal to mark the day appropriately, taking the levels of students into consideration but giving the final responsibility of how to arrange the in-class activities to the teachers themselves. The activity programme stated that bulletin boards should be formed in every classroom, letters should be written to the heroes of the 15th of July, poetry and arts competitions should be held in schools. In addition, another detailed programme was made by the Ministry of Education that determined the content of the speeches and poetry to be performed on these occasions and ceremonies (Açıklan & Kılıç, 2017, p.79). Some schools got students to watch [videos](#) about the 15th of July, which likened the day to the victories won in 1915 and 1922 during the foundation process of the Turkish Republic (MEB'in öğrencilere izlettiği 15 Temmuz videosu [July 15 video of MEB for students], 19 Eylül [September], 2016). In October 2019, 15th July was inaugurated as the Democracy and National Unity Day holiday (Ankara ili Kazan ilçesinin [Ankara Kazan province], 29 Ekim [October], 2016). The following year in September 2017, all schools were sent a booklet about 15th July in the first week of the academic year. The booklet included words of Atatürk, the definitions of concepts such as democracy, nation, flag, motherland, republic, government, coup and junta, a text written for children by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, paintings, poems and stories students prepared for this day (MEB, 2017).

Here, one of the main questions to be concerned about is how legitimate this new socio-political ritual, brought into schools by various regulations, became in the eyes of the partners of the school. Based on our interviews, observing this new national day is not important in the eyes of every teacher. Some teachers say that they have been compelled to mark this day against their will. It also emerged during the interviews that some teachers feel under pressure and "keep the booklet sent by the ministry in the classroom all the time, for fear that an inspector might come to check it" and that they "do not really study the subject in the class but showed that they did only on paper", "summaris[ing] the booklet with three or five sentences" and "hang[ing] the visuals on the doors of the classroom only for a short time [before] remov[ing] them".

When they were asked about their reasons for their behaviour, they had differing responses. The most frequently stated reason was that teachers found this day "rather political" and thus, they did not want to talk about it in the classroom. The other points the troubled the teachers were the graphic visuals about the attempted coup that were hung on the classroom walls and school bulletin boards. Some of these visuals included armed civilians on tanks. Some expressed that it was confusing to see armed civilians on pasted on school bulletin boards as

an expressed part of educational policy, the purpose of which was ostensibly to diminish the militaristic elements of Turkey's education system.



Picture 4: 15th July Victory of Democracy and Martyrs' Day program in Afşinbey Primary School (26.Eylül [September], 2018).

From this point of view, we can say that in order for the Victory of Democracy and Martyr's Day to be functioning effectively in schools, it needs to be legitimate in the eyes of all teachers and removed from its emphasis on militaristic discourse.

5 Conclusion

As we have seen, the social, economic and political changes in the last twenty years of the Turkish Republic are clearly reflected in the country's educational policies. This paper has used two aspects of education policy, the Student Pledge and the celebration of national festivals, to chart the changing emphasis on educational policy in Turkey. Today's educational policies have mainly been shaped according to the policy concerns of the AKP, who have been in power in Turkey for the last sixteen years. These policies can be clustered under two headings: democratisation and conservatism. Democratisation aimed at reducing the militaristic elements in education which arose mainly as results of wars and coups. To achieve this aim, the Student Pledge, which had been recited every morning during primary school assemblies and had an important place in the daily lives of primary schools, was abolished. However, this change made the Student Pledge one of the most debated topics in Turkey. While removing a pledge that forefronted militaristic and essentialist expressions was taken positively, many teachers highlighted the practical problems that came with the loss of the pledge, a major problem being the disruption of the timing of the primary school day. According to our

interviewees, an ordinary school day should start with a morning assembly where an inclusive pledge is recited. The teachers in our interview suggested that such a pledge would also help the political socialisation of the students and foster a sense of inclusivity while at the same time encouraging.

Another important step to scale down the militaristic elements of the Turkish education system was to make changes to the celebration of special days including national festivals. In 2012, the responsibility for organizing official festival celebrations was passed over to local authorities and individual school bodies and the presence of soldiers was withdrawn from these celebrations. Notably, although aimed at increasing the participation of people, enthusiasm for the celebrations diminished with these changes, and subdued celebrations caused reluctance, according to our interviewees. The Week of the Holy Birth was brought to schools as part of AKP's policy to raise a religious generation, but timing a religious day to coincide with 23rd April celebrations caused polarization in schools. After the failed coup attempt on 15th July 2016, however, it seemed that this polarization dissolved as concerns reoriented themselves around questions of how to acknowledge the newly inaugurated Victory and Martyrs Day.

Constituted after the failed coup attempt of 2016, Democracy and National Unity Day stands before our eyes as a unique example regarding the legitimisation process of socio-political rituals. No matter how compelling and insistent educational policies, policymakers, regulations are, it is the teachers who carry out those socio-political rituals in schools and are thus responsible for the way in which these policies are communicated to their students. We may conclude, then, that in order for such rituals to be effective, they first need to be legitimate in the eyes of the teacher. The power and influence of class teachers in primary schools is significant here. Thus, it seems that from the opinions expressed in the interviews undertaken as part of this research, the commemoration of the events of 15th July 2016 has not been fully legitimised. Therefore, the enforcements of central organizations or school principals have faced resistance.

National festivals and socio-political rituals are considerably important parameters in terms of the political and expressive function of education. Based upon this research, it can be said that festivals and socio-political rituals in Turkey have been constituted based on the objectives of the government at the time, and as such are subject to constant change. At the same time, one can see that these changes come to life depending on the attitudes of teachers and principals in schools. This paper also shows us how rapidly these rituals, which seem to be a very stable and established part of ordinary school life, have evolved into a dynamic structure in response to rapid political changes, as well as what important catalysts they are regarding the legitimisation of new policies.

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Pictures

Picture 1: Reşit Galip (24 Nisan [April], 1933). Türk Çocuğu Yasası [Turkish Child Act]. *Hâkimiyeti Millîye* [Sovereignty of Nation], p.1.

Picture 2: Ünye'nin Dünkü Çocukları Dolmabahçe'de [Ünye's Born yesterday are in Dolmabahçe], 11 Kasım [November], 2015 <http://www.unyetv.net/gundem/unyenin-dunku-cocuklari-dolmabahcede/>

Picture 3: İstiklâl İlkokulu'ndan Kutlu Doğum programı [Holy Birth program in İstiklâl Primary School], 25 Nisan [April], 2015. Çorum Haber Gazetesi [Çorum Newspaper].

<http://www.corumhaber.net/guncel/istikl-ilkokulundan-kutlu-dogum-programi-h40159.html>

Picture 4: Afşinbey İlkokulu 15 Temmuz Demokrasi Zaferi ve Şehitleri Anma Programı [15th July Victory of Democracy and Martyrs' Day Programme in Afşinbey Primary School], 26 Eylül [September], 2018).

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