

Development of Preschool Education and Care in Turkey: Actors and Challenges (1968–1993)

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Early childhood education and care, understood as the collective and educational care for children younger than the compulsory schooling age, became a subject of concern in Turkey from the 1960s onwards in connection with major economic and social developments (women's employment, industrialization, and urbanization). The number of *anaokulu* (accommodating children from 3 to 6-year-olds and from 3 to 5-year-olds after the 1981 reform) increased from 80 schools in 1923 to 146 in 1963, and to 16,016 in 2004. It appears that the number of *kreş* (for 0 to 3-year-olds) and *anasınıfı* (for 6 to 7-year-olds and for 5 to 6-year-olds from 1981) grew as well.¹ While the historiography of preschool education in Turkey has focused on the end of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the Republic,² the second half of the 20th century has been less studied, even though this period exhibits an expansion of preschool institutions in the country. How can we then explain the increase in the number of preschool institutions from the 1960s onwards? Following a historiographical current that questioned the paradigm which sees the Turkish state as the sole actor of the country's modernization,³ this master's thesis seeks to understand the changes in mentalities and the institutional evolutions that have enabled the rise in the number of pre-school institutions, as well as the role of the non-state actors and actresses in this growth.

This thesis utilises political sources [National Archives, Archives of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM)], non-governmental sources (the Association for the Development of Turkish Early Childhood Education's (TOÖEGD) journal, the journal of the Progressive Women's Association (İKD) and the 1980s feminist journals *Sosyalist Feminist*, *Kaktüs* and *Feminist*), as well as archives from international organizations [World Health Organisation (WHO), World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) and International Center for Education (CIE)] to study the co-construction and institutionalization of the Turkish preschool system.

In contrast to a historiography that underlined the lack of involvement of the Turkish state in the field of early childhood education until the 1990s,⁴ this master's thesis highlights the delegation of public service undertaken by the state from the 1960s, as well as the role of preschool education in the state propaganda in the beginning of the 1980s.

1 Bekman and Gürlelel 2005.

2 Fortna 2000.

3 Aymes, Gourisse and Massicard 2013.

4 Bekman 2005.

The delegation of public service in the field of preschool education and care during the 1960s and the 1970s can be interpreted as a form of state action. Indeed, through the tax exemption of several associations working for the development of preschool education, the state encouraged its spread. Among these associations, the Association for the Development of Turkish Early Childhood Education (TOÖEGD) promoted a universal access to early childhood education in order to further the education of young Turks from an early age, as well as to fight malnutrition which affected 20% of preschool children in the early 1970s.⁵ At the time, notwithstanding the work of the TOÖEGD, the Turkish state encouraged access to preschool facilities only for children whose mothers worked, particularly through a ‘statute on the working conditions of pregnant or nursing mothers, lactation rooms and nurseries’ (*gebe veya emzikli kadınların çalıştırılma şartlarıyla emzirme odaları ve çocuk bakım yurtları (kreşler) hakkında tüzük*). This statute, adopted on April 4, 1964, compelled employers of more than 300 female workers to build a nursery in order to accommodate children from 0 to 6 years old. Through this statute, the state is trying to meet the new care needs of Turkish families in connection with the rapid urbanization that the country was experiencing.

The military coup of September 12, 1980, particularly violent and de-structuring for the country, led to a redefinition of the role of preschool education. For the military regime, Turkey’s evils were due to the popularity of ‘perverse’ ideologies among the youth (communism, Kurdish nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism). In the fight against those ideologies, educational reform became a focus of the new regime. Until then, thought of by the authorities as a means of caring for children whose mothers worked, preschool establishments thus became real tools of state propaganda which materialized in the teaching of Kemalist ‘values’ in the *anasımifi*. The state’s emphasis on the *anasımifi* led to a form of ‘scholarization’⁶ of the Turkish childhood education. This phenomenon characterizes an erasure of the specific nature of *anasımifi* and a growing dependency toward primary school.

Apart from the actions taken by the Turkish state, this thesis emphasizes the predominant role civil society played in the development of early childhood institutions in the 1970s, as well as the transformation that took place among the actors involved after the 1980 coup.

In particular, this thesis exhibits the Organisation of Progressive Women’s (İKD) contribution in the social strife for preschool education and care in Turkey. Founded in 1975, İKD aimed to defend the rights of working women. With its 15,000 members, it was the largest women’s organisation at the time.⁷ Between 1976 and 1979, this organization set up a campaign called ‘a nursery for each neighborhood, for each workplace’ (*Her Mahallede, Her İş Yerine Kreş Kampanyası*) that had a strong impact throughout the country. Through this campaign, İKD denounced the non-application of the ‘statute on the working conditions of pregnant or nursing mothers, lactation rooms and nurseries.’ This struggle climaxed with the 1978 petition ‘We Want

5 Baysal 1981.

6 Garnier 2011.

7 Vassaf 1980.

Nurseries' which collected nearly 60,000 signatures, a first in the history of the Republic, and called for expanding the access to nurseries for all children whether or not their mothers worked.

The 1980 coup, by leading to the closure of many non-governmental organizations, reshaped the landscape of non-state actors involved in the development of the Turkish preschool system. The second feminist wave, which emerged in the 1980s, distanced itself from the left-wing women's organizations of the 1970s, including İKD which defended a vision of women closely linked to their roles as mothers. Abandoning the fight on early childhood educational development, these feminist organizations focused on new central struggles, in particular the fight against domestic violence. In addition, members of TOÖEGD who enjoyed national and international recognition before the 1980s, now faced competition from a new generation of early childhood education experts who advised the military regime in the development of *anasınıfı* and who gained popularity within OMEP.

Through the study of the history of preschool education and care in Turkey, this thesis rethinks the chronology and the actors and actresses of this evolution by putting forward their interconnections at the national and international levels.

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