Effects of privatization on education quality and equity: Comparison of a public and a private primary school in Turkey

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Abstract

This article examines privatization in education and its effects on education quality and equity in Turkey. Private schools are profit-making and charge tuition fees from families. The Comparison of public and private schools was observed through a survey. Data was collected through interview with the Heads of two primary schools, one public and the other private, in Camlica, Istanbul. This study revealed that education quality and physical conditions were better in private school. However the private school cannot be regarded to have greater success because they do not compete with equal conditions. Both for-profit and non-profit institutions are still under debate as to whether they could offer solutions to problems of education. As it is seen in the example of Turkey, focusing on public schools would be more promising to achieve quality and equity in education.

Keywords: Privatization in education, education quality, public schools, private schools

1. Introduction

The importance of education is rising day by day. Technological advances, modern life standards require well educated, proficient people around the world. Moreover, education is seen as an important tool to reach economic achievement for the countries. Hence, many governments try to succeed in the education sector, by trying to develop it (Alexander, 2000). For this purpose, governments should provide education for all and increase the quality of education at schools. Especially developing countries are faced with major difficulties in reaching such goals. In many countries, governments strive to enable better education to their citizens. With their inadequate resources, they sometimes come up against growing population and limited schools, deficient and low qualified teachers and poor educational environment because of high costs of education services (Glewwe, 2002).

While governments were suffering from such problems, privatisation policies came in and appeared to provide a solution (Tan, 1985). Some authors agree that if governments can deliver the education services through private sector, the burden on the national budget can be reduced and quality of education can get higher. Private schools can be pro-profit or non-profit and these would have distinct effects on the education system. We will seek an answer to whether privatisation is a beneficial policy for education systems.

In this article firstly, reasons and historical background of privatisation in education will be examined. Then privatisation in Turkish education system will be analysed from different perspectives. First the role of private schools in Turkey especially at the primary level will be discussed. This part will cover three main subjects: history of privatisation in Turkish primary education, how private schools operate, the differences between public and private primary schools. Second, two selected Turkish primary schools, one public and the other private, will be compared as a case study, with their physical and educational environments. Lastly, this paper will discuss such
questions as: Do private institutions help to reduce the government’s expenses on education? Do private schools increase the quality of education? Can these schools take on a pro-poor direction in Turkey?

1.1 Why privatisation became a policy in education?

We should first define the meaning of privatisation to answer this question. According to Belfield and Levin (2002), privatisation is the change of hands of managements, commitments and assessments from government-state establishments to private organisations. It became important especially within the globalisation phenomenon. Global world requires adopting the innovations and advancing technologies and this has a pressure on governments which aim to develop. However, governments’ limited resources lock reaching this aim especially in developing countries. In this process, globalisation forces individual states to reorganise their policies and reform their managements through privatisation as an alternative solution (Ka-Ho Mok, 2005).

In the UK, although welfare services were vastly provided by the government until 1988, after this year privatisation policy started to affect, to some extent, some sectors such as, health, security and education. An important act was the Education Reform launched in 1988. Schools started to run on four components: ‘open enrolment’ enables parents to choose any schools they want, ‘formula funding’ allows institutions to take fund considering the number of students, ‘local management of schools’ gives permission to local groups to govern institutions and ‘facility for schools’ means providers allocate money as they want, to these schools (Le Grand, 1991 p.1258). All of the aforementioned components increased the importance of privatisation and this policy began to spread around the world.

Education is not only a private good but also has public outcomes. Kwong (2000) claims that more educated people generally can get better jobs and reach higher life standards than less educated. He also mentions that less developed countries can achieve in the economy as well as developed ones, and compete in the global market through using these well educated people. Education became a good investment for governments after realising the relationship between education and economic growth in 1960s. UN members focused on state schools and decided to spend more money on education for economic achievement. Nevertheless, the debt crisis in 1980s caused decrease in the allocation of money for the education sector and also others. This was the situation which put forward privatisation as a possible solution (Chandani et al, 2007).

Education is a fundamental right and governments should require this for every citizen. United Declaration of Human Rights declared its importance first in 1948, then in 1966 stating that ‘Primary education shall be free and compulsory and available to all’ (Bray, 2004, p.22). After these declarations, Europe and the USA started to act and put pressure on their member states and colonies to initiate and provide compulsory education for their citizens. Furthermore, in the 1990s, The United Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) set a goal for their members to supply “education for all” (EFA). This act aims for everybody to access basic education. However, although many governments accepted this act, their inadequate resources prevented them from reaching their goals. In addition, some countries, even if they achieved to provide this access for their citizens, would fail in the quality of education again mostly because of their limited resources (Chandani et al, 2007).

In this framework, privatisation was seen as a possible tool in some regions to achieve education for all. Such that, non-profit private schools started to become prevalent in some developing countries. These were founded by international and national NGOs and were running substantially on donations and on a limited scale on the very low tuition fees charged from families. India and sub-Saharan Africa, where especially poor people in rural areas were deprived of accessing education because of inadequate schools, are typical examples of the regions these schools has operated (Caddell & Ashley, 2006). For instance, The CIBT Research and Development Committee organised a project in 2002 to set up private schools for the poor in India. School costs were mainly covered from donations and a small income was supplied by trade of some products, such as, belts, ties and gift cards, which were made by students at schools. This project brought access to schools for many poor students in India (Tooley & Dixon, 2003).

However, although these schools helped to develop the enrolment rates, gender equity in education could not be enhanced. These private schools helped the poor families to meet education, but for girls, enrolment rates were still low. Tuition fees, although being very low, caused the poor parents to prioritise their sons (Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006).

When it comes to quality of education in these non-profit private schools, results from different studies varies and we can say that it is still under debate whether these schools serve higher or less quality of education compared to the public schools (Caddell & Ashley, 2006).

On the other hand, for-profit private schools arose as a result of elite demands for quality of education (Davidson-Harden and Majhanovich, 2006). For example, in Turkey quality of education was seen as unsatisfactory
and the government was unable to satisfy parents’ demands with limited resources (Cinoglu, 2006; Collins, 2002). Similarly in the USA 11% of school age children are sent to private schools by parents and are paying tuition fees with the expectation of better quality education (Belfield & Levin, 2002). Nevertheless, even if for-profit private schools succeed in better quality education, they can cause inequity.

From the context described above, one could say while non-profit private schools work for the benefit of the poor, for-profit ones serve for middle-high class. However Erdogan (2005), although he had not supplied a strong argument, suggested that for-profit schools can also serve for good of education in general, indirectly in such that students who are receiving education in these institutions would not be a burden on the national budget anymore and the taxes to be received from these schools would even supply extra incomes. Thus, government can transfer these savings to enhance public education services.

That is to say, access to education and quality of education stands as major challenges for policies to be developed. Governments have an important role to convey education service to their citizens which is difficult especially for less-developed and developing countries with limited resources. Different sorts of privatisation applications has been tried as a potential solution to overcome these challenges. The following chapter analyses reasons and reflections of privatisation in Turkish primary education.

2 Methodology
2.1 Case Study: Two Primary Schools in Camlica-Istanbul

In this study a public primary school and a private primary school in Camlica were selected as a case study. Camlica was preferred because it is known as a residential area where people from distinct socio-economic classes from poorest to richest reside.

The schools were compared with their physical and educational conditions. Data was collected through observation and interviews conducted with head of both schools. After the consent of the local authorities and school administrations were taken, each school was visited. Besides, some statistical data were provided from the school administrations, regarding the success of their students in nationwide exams, number of teachers and students, and education levels of teachers etc.

For the Data analysis, observation notes and the interviews were tabulated and summarized. Interviewees’ and schools’ names were not used during the data analysis to protect the privacy of the participants. Findings and the regarding statistics were presented as tables with the percentage values when relevant.

3 Findings

Table 1 shows the teacher and student numbers; while in public school 1937 students receive education, this number is just 465 for private school in 2010-2011. There are 70 teachers in public and the number of students per teacher is almost 28. In private school 50 teachers are employed and the number of students per teacher is nearly 10. First obvious observation from this data would be the much higher student number attending to the public school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Public Primary School</th>
<th>Private Primary School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>1937</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of teachers</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students per teacher</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of teachers holding masters degree</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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On the other hand, while the student number is higher in public school, number of teacher is relatively low compared to the private one, meaning the number of students per teacher is higher in public primary school. Hence, while teachers in private school can look after students conscientiously, in public school teachers can not take care of children effectively. Table 1, also illustrates that the percentage of teachers holding a masters degree is similar, 7.1% for public, 8% for private primary school. It should be noted that in Turkey one has to hold a university degree of teaching to work as a teacher in either a public or private institution. Thus all teachers in our selected schools had the same minimum qualifications.

In table 2, physical conditions of schools were compared. The student number a classroom is 45 in average for public and 13-20 for private school. This number is far from universal education goal of 25 and it is obvious that classrooms are significantly crowded in public school. The increasing rate of population in Istanbul and inadequate resources of public education can be main reasons for these.

While there is some equipment such as, computer/internet and overhead projector in the both schools’ classrooms, private school has also additional equipment like projectors in the classrooms. According to head of schools, while these machines are used by private schools teachers for almost every lesson, public school teachers use them occasionally. A reason for less use of these machines in the public school may be the difficulty caused by the high population in a class.

Although there are science and computer laboratories in both schools, private school has more modern equipments than public school. Computers in public school were provided by the government as a goal of universal education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruments in the classrooms</th>
<th>Public Primary School</th>
<th>Private Primary School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer / Internet</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overhead projector</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projector</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science laboratory</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer laboratory</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In table 3 quality of education was analysed by looking at last graduates’ grades during the 8. class (last year) and their performance in the national “Secondary Education Institutions Student Selection and Placement Exam” (SIS). 110 graduates out of 212 received a certificate of excellence, which is the highest certificate given according to students’ tests scores during each term, in public primary school. In private one, 22 graduates out of 28 received this certificate. According to this measure, while the percentage of these most successful pupils was almost 52 in public, this percentage was nearly 79 in private school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIS success</th>
<th>Public Primary School</th>
<th>Private Primary School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of last graduates</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students who received a certificate of excellence</td>
<td>110 (52%)</td>
<td>22 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of students who took the exam</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement to Anatolian / Science High Schools</td>
<td>33 (16%)</td>
<td>13 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placement to Vocational High Schools</td>
<td>67 (32%)</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>112(52%)</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*SIS: Secondary Education Institutions Student Selection and Placement Exam

In addition, 100 graduates out of 212, in public school, passed the SIS (OKS) exam and 33(16%) pupils could
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get into Anatolian/Science High Schools, which are the highest level schools in Turkey. In private school, 25 students took this exam and 19 of these passed. 13 (52%) pupils out of passers were placed in Anatolian/Science High Schools. When the rates of success in this exam are compared, private school students keep ahead in this competition.

As a result of these scores, it seems that quality of education is higher in private school than the public one. One of the reasons for this is that private schools are in a competition with other schools. If they can be successful and achieve well in the exams, more parents can choose their school for the following year. Furthermore, private schools have to satisfy expectations of the current students’ parents who are paying considerably high tuition fees for these schools. Schools’ physical conditions and teacher performance are highly qualified to provide this service. Especially teachers in private schools make a hard effort to catch the success in education.

Next question in the interviews was the socio-economic levels of families. Head of the public school said that only 3% of the parents were university graduates while others belonged to the working class. The head of private school did not answer this question stating this information was private and they could not explain parents’ income levels. However, he could say 70% of parents were businessmen and the others were generally professional such as solicitors, judges and doctors.

Lastly scholarships for poor and the rate of beneficiary students in their schools were asked to the head of private school. There were 32 beneficiary students at school and this was equal to approximately 7% of students. These students were chosen according to their success in tests scores. If students are successful and their income levels are low they are more preferred by the school management. Especially the children of veterans and martyrs are given more chance to get these scholarships.

It should be noted that, public primary schools are free in Turkey; only, parents are offered to contribute with a non compulsory donation of 50-100 TL (£20-£40) for a year. Which is another indicator that the government funds are probably not enough to cover education costs in these schools. On the other hand private schools charge considerably high tuition fees; in our example, 9000 TL (£3600) is collected yearly for a student. When this is taken into consideration it is not surprising that they can improve the quality with their huge resources.

Private schools effect Turkish education system in two ways. Although, private schools help to increase quality of education, access to these schools is not equal for everyone because of their high tuition fees. Private schools accept beneficiary poor students up to 10% but it is still not adequate. This can widen inequity in the society for the access to good quality education.

4 Discussion

In this chapter effects of privatisation to Turkish education system will be discussed in the frame of three questions. Do private institutions help to reduce the government’s expenses on education? Do private schools increase the quality of education? Can these schools take on a pro-poor direction?

Private schools are still not very common in Turkey. For example, while there are 32.431 public schools, 879 private schools are run at primary level (National Education Statistic, 2010). The percentage of private primary schools is just 2.63. Hence, the government bears the important part of educational expenses. As it is mentioned in the previous chapter, free-compulsory education was provided for primary level by the government and the enrolment rate is coming closer to a 100%. However, schools’ poor facilities and less quality of education are still serious problems for the government. Private schools conditions are different from public schools and serve better with good facilities. According to the National Education Statistics in 2002, the expenses of private institutions per pupil are higher than in public institutions. At primary level, private schools invest in one student’s education 3.1 fold higher than public schools (Yuksel, 2007).

In Turkey while the government almost reached the goal of free-compulsory education for all, it still could not overcome the failure in the quality. It did not have enough school buildings and classrooms to meet the number of students. Moreover, there were not adequate teachers to employ at schools. Teacher absenteeism and their low performances, crowded classrooms (50 students in a class) and poor physical facilities were the main reasons for the lack of quality education (Kızıldağ, 2009; Karaköse and Kocabaş, 2006).

On the other hand private schools achieved better quality. Whereas tests scores were less than OECD averages in public schools during 2000s, these were higher for private schools. According to Ministry of Education’s data in the “national selection to secondary level exam”; the top ten scores were often shared by private school students (Turkish Education Technologies Directorship). Bay and Tuğluk (2004) compared students’ science lesson success between private and public schools. They found that students’ cognitive development scores were higher in private
schools than public. However, this difference was seen only at students’ sublevel abilities. Interestingly, the gap was abolished at high level intellectual abilities. At this point it should not be disregarded that a direct comparison of the performances of state and private schools would not reflect the actual successes of the parties because the two have unbalanced facilities and also student backgrounds are not equivalent, it is conceivable to expect private schools to do better (Karaköse and Kocabaş, 2006). For example, Kingdon (1996) showed that, controlling for characteristics of samples, such as students’ background and school conditions, demolishes any significant quality difference that is observed between Indian private and public schools.

Another debatable area is the position of students from poor households. High tuition fees at private schools causes inequity and limited free places for poor students are not enough to solve the problem (Coleman et al., 1982). The ‘appropriate’ provision of education can become a highly ideological debate and cause fraught relations between private and public education advocates. In Nepal, for instance, intense political conflicts over this issue have not been resolved for over half a century (Caddell, 2006). In the case of Turkey such battles have not appeared for the time being nevertheless this may be due to the currently limited numbers of private schools and that risk can not be disregarded if the privatisation in education spreads.

However, in different developing countries such as, India, Africa etc., non-profit private institutions purpose equal and quality education for poor. This was seen an alternative solution to reach targets of EFA and Millennium Development Goal in these areas. Although these schools can take on a pro-poor direction, they are still in the minority and the results of this new approach are yet under debate (Alderman, 2001). For example different studies reached different conclusions on the quality of these schools. Furthermore it is argued that they have not been able to solve gender inequity (Tooley & Dixon, 2006; Mehrotra & Panchamukhi, 2006).

Erdogan (2005) and Yuksel (2007) defended privatisation in education in Turkey. They argued that these schools provides better quality education, there is yet unsupplied demand and if private schools get more common they would decrease a considerable burden of national budget by parents’ overtaking the education expenses of more students. Moreover the fees would decrease because of competition and they would become more widely accessible to relatively lower income families.

These may be conceivable suggestions but does not provide a strong argument about how private schools would make good for increasing the quality of national education in general. Furthermore the precautions they offer to alleviate the inequity problem are not absolute solutions as they did not claim.

5 Conclusion

Turkish private schools are vastly profit-making and were founded in response to elite demands. While Turkish government reached the goal of free education for all in primary level, its failure in quality of education was the main cause behind the demand for private schools. They are yet very few compared to the public schools, thus their economic contribution to the government remains limited.

When compared public primary school and private primary school in Camlica, schools’ physical conditions and students’ background were very different from each other. Private school had better conditions and not-surprisingly higher success.

In conclusion private schools will continue to exist as long as the demand exists. However privatisation does not appear to be promising in the sense of raising the quality of national education. Governments, while taking steps to regulate the existing private institutions, should concentrate on enhancing the adequacy and quality of public education through not only increasing the investments but also improving the system particularly in regard to teachers’ quality and motivation. Thus depleting the demand for private schools can be aimed in long term.

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