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INTRODUCTION

Turkey at a crossroads: critical debates and issues in education

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This introduction seeks to provide a contextual framework for understanding recent developments in the Turkish education system. For this purpose, it reviews some major policy issues such as neo-liberal education reforms and increasing religiosity. Then, the article introduces the various contributions included in this special issue of *Comparative Education*, and highlights some of the emerging issues and patterns.

Introduction

Modern Turkey has experienced fundamental changes in the last two decades, including increasing economic liberalisation and the emergence of the politics of identity (such as the resurgence of Islam, the Kurdish question and liberal claims to rights and freedoms) (Keyman and Koyuncu 2005). Moreover, ‘political Islam’ (Güven 2005) has made its mark on Turkish modernity with the victory of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, hereafter: AKP) in the 2002 elections. These developments and AKP’s policies which were largely characterised by ‘neo-conservatism, neoliberalism, Islamism, victimisation, and anti-laicism’ (Kaya 2014, 2) have influenced educational policies and reform initiatives in Turkey.

This special issue seeks to analyse the educational structures and processes in Turkey from a historical perspective. By doing so, it explores how and to what extent recent socio-economic and political developments and large-scale education reforms have influenced equitable access to good quality education for different members of its population. Turkey is an interesting country to observe since it has been undergoing major transformations in its economy, politics and demographics in recent decades, and the country is characterised by large socio-economic inequities which have been on the rise in recent history. Furthermore, contemporary Turkey provides a rich case to reflect upon education in relation to tensions and dilemmas about national and multicultural citizenship, diversity, ethnic problems, multilingualism and gender issues. The organisation and purposes of education, as in many other contexts, have always been a battleground among different groups to shape the country’s past and future direction. However, education today holds a more central place than ever in Turkey’s political and social scene.

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In this introductory article, we provide a contextual framework for understanding recent developments in the Turkish education system. For this purpose, we review some major policy issues such as neo-liberal education reforms and increasing religiosity. Then we introduce the various contributions in this special issue which are designed to give insight into complex relations between the history of modernisation, current politics, societal developments and educational processes. Finally, we highlight a number of emerging themes and patterns.

Education in Turkey: structures, developments and major issues

Historical overview

During the late Ottoman period, schools were organised into three separate groups, each operating independently. The first and the most widespread type comprised the district schools and madrasas which were based on teaching of the Koran and Islamic traditions. The second group included reformed schools and high schools, while the third group included colleges and schools teaching in foreign languages. According to the founders of the Turkish Republic, these three different types of schools were raising individuals with very different views, lifestyles, values and visions, as well as with little commitment to Atatürk's aim of making a modern Turkish nation (Kaplan 1999). Consequently, in 1924, the Law on the Unity of Education was introduced, stipulating the abolition of the madrasas and the district schools, and placing all education, teaching and scientific institutions (including colleges, foreign language schools and private schools) under the control of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). The Ministry also assumed responsibility for and control of religious education. The Law determined the general organisation and administration of the education system, and laid the basis for a highly centralised national education system (Gök 2007). This centralised governance structure continues to define the contemporary Turkish education system. A firm commitment to secularism has also been central to the education system since the early years of the Republic (OECD 2007), but it has been subjected to intense debates in the past decade, which will be discussed below.

The role of education in modernisation, development and nation building was deemed critical in the early years of the Republic (Simsek and Yildirim 2004). In his various speeches, Atatürk – the founding leader of modern Turkey – referred to education as one of the most important factors in national independence and development. According to him, failure to provide good quality education to all citizens would eventually result in poverty and subordination to other nations. In that period, literacy campaigns were initiated, targeting particularly rural population, which comprised the majority of the general population. The main objective was to improve the level of literacy and to modernise the countryside (Gök 2007). Teachers were assigned a crucial role in developing modern values among the new generation of Turkish citizens. They were perceived as 'intellectuals' who would disseminate knowledge and values to the masses with the goal of promoting modernisation. After the 1980s, however, with the advance of globalisation and neo-liberal tendencies in Turkey, the teacher's role and image have been transformed. Teachers have been largely redefined as professionals or technicians tasked with contributing to economic development by raising competent and able individuals in accordance with market demands (Unal 2005). The role of education has also been redefined, with increasing emphasis on economic development, competitiveness and integration into the global economy.

The population of Turkey is a legacy of the multi-ethnic and multireligious Ottoman Empire. Despite this diversity, the Turkish Republic has been characterised by the state's organic vision of society. From the start, education has been seen as the most important means of creating a new nation based on a single national culture, a single ethnic identity and a single religion and language. Turkish citizenship has privileged a republican model which put an emphasis on the unity and indivisibility of the nation and non-recognition of ethnic and language differences. Schoolbooks have been written to promote an ethno-religious (Turkish-Sunni Muslim) national identity, while disregarding those whose religion was different (Armenian, Greek and Jewish minorities) and those whose language was different (Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, etc.). These processes have developed into disparities and inequities across the country along with exclusionary practices towards different ethnic, linguistic and gender-based groups (Timmerman 1999). For instance, the uniform curriculum for primary schools emphasises Turkish language and culture. Some argue that by ignoring the historical existence of sub-cultures, their norms, values and ways of life, the formal education system functions as a powerful tool of assimilation for ethnically diverse groups (Sahin and Gulmez 2000).

However, over the last two decades, Turkey has been undergoing a major transformation as a result of the European Union (EU) accession process, its economy's integration into global markets and its self-declared role as a model country in and for the Middle East. In this process, non-Turkish and non-Muslim groups have attained a greater public visibility while claiming a right to equal citizenship. Education emerges as the vital and strategic sphere in which these claims have been crystallised. For instance, Kurds who constitute approximately 20% of the Turkish population advocate for mother-tongue education. The Alevi minority (a heterodox form of Anatolian Islam) objects to a compulsory 'Religious Culture and Ethics' course on the basis that it disregards their faith and violates their right to freedom of religion. Although non-Muslim minorities constitute less than 1% of the Turkish population, their increasing visibility and claims for recognition challenge the dominant definition of Turks as Muslim as promoted in education, politics and public life. The last decade has also witnessed the emergence of newly organised ethnic groups such as Circassians and Lazikis who have demanded that their languages be included in the curriculum since they are concerned about their linguistic annihilation.

The AKP has introduced several reforms that have had a far-reaching impact on the country's established educational structures and processes. A major step was the comprehensive curriculum reform in 2005 which aimed at introducing a student-centred pedagogy (SCP) along with a constructivist paradigm (Altinyelken 2011). The aim of the reform, according to the MoNE, was 'to adapt education to the norms of the European Union' and 'to prepare Turkey for the 21st century' (MoNE 2005). Moreover, the government incorporated new elective Kurdish, Circassian and Laziki courses into the curriculum in 2012. These courses might be considered an important step for the recognition of Turkey's minorities whose existence has long been denied since the foundation of the Republic.

Major issues

Neo-liberal education reforms

Since Turkey has a highly centralised education system, the majority of reforms and change proposals originate at the national level. The decisions of policy-makers have

often been influenced by global trends, particularly by developments in Western societies. Since the 1980s, neo-liberal policies have been increasingly embraced in the Turkish education system, transforming it in important ways (Gök 2007). The outcomes of the neo-liberal trend, such as privatisation and increases in parental contributions, have been subject to heightened debates and substantial criticism. The neo-liberal trend has been supported by global institutions such as the World Bank and the EU, and has been further enhanced by Turkey's EU membership process (Sayılan 2006).

An important aspect of this neo-liberal trend is the 'monetisation' of education by an increasing amount of spending by parents. Although public primary education is 'free' in Turkey, parents are asked to pay registration fees and make 'voluntary' donations to schools under the name of 'parental contributions' (Simsek 2006). These contributions are requested for financing more than 40 different items, such as report cards, learning materials, heating, cleaning and maintenance of school buildings (Egitim Sen 2005; Karapehlivan 2010). Parental contributions amount to substantial sums; for instance in 2003, such parental contributions in primary and secondary education were twice more compared to the government education budget (Keskin and Demirci 2003). Moreover, the AKP government aims to increase the share of private schools in the primary education sector. For this purpose, the government proposed a number of measures to promote the establishment of private schools with the help of public funds. Such support by public resources seems contradictory when many public schools report serious financial difficulties (Aydoğan 2008).

The commercialisation trends have been observed in higher education as well; the government supports private enterprise through tax breaks and land grants (Sayılan 2006). The declining public resources and lower quality education at public schools have led to an explosive increase in the numbers of private tutoring institutions preparing students for entrance exams to secondary schools and universities (Tansel and Bircan 2006). This trend has intensified the educational inequalities based on socio-economic background (Aydoğan 2008). Recently, private tutoring institutions were closed down and many of these schools were transformed into private schools.

Another concern is that the emphasis has shifted in education to providing the basic competencies required by the market economy. According to some critics, instead of educating conscious citizens with humanist values, the schools are aiming at producing conservative entrepreneurs (Sayılan 2006). Public education has increasingly come to be seen as an outdated concept, and the notion that education is a service which should be bought by the consumers has become prevalent (Unal 2005).

Increasing religiosity

The AKP period has witnessed the return of religion to public space, accompanied by an increasing religiosity in the education system. According to some scholars, 'Education is certainly the most delicate sphere that the AKP and previous governments have utilised in order to indoctrinate the masses utilising certain discourses, rhetorics, and ideologies' (Kaya 2014, 9). Indeed, during the 2002 electoral campaigns, the AKP had two top Islamic priorities, both related to education: lifting the ban on headscarves, and equating religious and secular degrees, which would practically end the limitations the Imam Hatip (religious secondary schools) students experienced in the university entrance examination (Kaya 2014). In recent years, both policy changes have been introduced. Since the issue of headscarves is discussed at length by Seggie in this special issue, only the Imam Hatip schools will be further elaborated here.

The Imam Hatip Schools were originally founded as a form of vocational school to train government-employed imams. They were first opened in 1924 with very few students and were eventually closed down in 1931. However, in the 1950s, they were reopened; yet their graduates were permitted to study only at theology faculties at the higher education level. In 1974, the laws were changed, allowing these graduates to study at any other department depending on their performance in the university entrance examination. The laws were modified once again in 1999, and the graduates became subject to a lower coefficient in the university entrance examination, which gave them a competitive disadvantage. This resulted in a substantial drop in the enrolment rate to such secondary schools. The AKP government succeeded in having the coefficient removed in 2009 and this has subsequently increased the popularity of such schools. The AKP government's decision in 2012 to increase compulsory education from 8 to 12 years, and dividing schooling into three separate sections (four years of primary school, four years of elementary school and then four years of high school) also directly relate to increasing the popularity of religious schools, even if it is framed by the government as an attempt to attain the compulsory education level of other OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. The new Education Law allows families to choose among different types of secondary schools, including the general, vocational and religious Imam Hatip schools (Kaya 2014). The Law introduced two important changes: vocational orientation can be decided upon at a much earlier age, for example, 9–10 years; and students who finalise the first four years of primary education can continue with their education at Imam Hatip elementary schools. Critics noted that such religious orientation is too early and is often dictated by parents' choices and demands (Gün and Baskana 2014).

These reforms, together with unbanning the headscarf in secondary schools in 2014, generated a heated debate in Turkey on the basis that they would endanger secularism. The criticisms, however, are not only limited to secularism. Several educational researchers also note that these reforms, such as decreasing the enrolment age to primary schools to 60 months (reducing the official schooling age to 5.5 years) without necessary measures, would undermine the quality of education and deepen inequalities across the country (ERG 2012). Implementation challenges included unsuitable desks for such young learners, large differences in ability levels in early grades, differential outcomes in reading and other learning objectives, classroom management problems for teachers, overcrowding in schools and an increase in double shifts (Gün and Baskana 2014). One of the most significant results of the new 4 + 4 + 4 structure in education is the substantial increase in the number of Imam Hatip elementary schools and Imam Hatip high schools. For instance, in 2012–2013 academic year, 1099 Imam Hatip elementary schools were opened. Their total number was 601 before 1998 (ERG 2012).

Furthermore, Islamisation of education was also experienced through the curriculum. In 2012, two optional courses in secondary schools, Civic Education and Agriculture, were removed and three religion-based courses were introduced: The Quran, Prophet Muhammad's Life and Fundamentals of Religion. Although these courses are optional, there are various reports which show that eventually they became compulsory since often these are the only optional courses the schools offer and the students need to take them to complete the credit requirement (Gün and Baskana 2014). Some other signs of increasing religiosity in education included the following: replacing staff working at the Ministry with persons with a religious worldview; appointment of more than 7000 religious education teachers, while far fewer teachers are deployed for chemistry, biology or physics in schools that were in need of them; sanctioning a number of

teachers who taught evolution theory in biology courses; distribution of religious books to students for free; an increasing number of appointments of teachers with a religious education background to school management positions and the increasing presence of religion in textbooks (Okcabol 2009; Özmen 2009). Media news headlines reported such practices, generating many reactions from the segments of society which favour secularism. They also appear to contribute to the Constitutional Court's decision in 2008 that 'AKP has become the focal point of activities opposing secularism' (Okcabol 2009, 32).

Pressing issues and the need for reform

The need to reform the education system is widely acknowledged by scholars, politicians and the general public in Turkey. Reforms are deemed particularly urgent in a number of areas, such as equity (e.g. reducing regional disparities in access to education), declining government expenditure on education (Gök 2007), resource distribution, poor or insufficient infrastructure, access to higher and vocational education, bureaucratic structure and the curriculum. Furthermore, despite several reforms and new inclusive strategies towards non-Turkish minorities, research shows that the core of the curriculum is still based on a nationalist ethos while disregarding a multi-perspective approach in schoolbooks (Çayır 2014). For instance, ethnic differences still receive no mention in new History and Social Studies textbooks. Moreover, contemporary Turkey continues to be characterised by intense problems regarding the quality of education, high school dropouts, the gender gap, multilingual education, citizenship education, inclusion of minorities and the tension between Islamic and secular groups. Consequently, there are increasing calls for re-conceptualising education in the context of growing diversity, inequity and new claims to equal citizenship.

Overview of the contributions to the special issue

In creating this issue, we sought to bring together educational scholars who work on different aspects of educational processes in Turkey. Hence the articles explore various aspects of education: the curriculum, SCP, textbooks, early childhood education, access to good quality education and the headscarf issue. The authors examine these issues by focusing on different educational levels, ranging from pre-school to higher education. The papers seek to explore these highly topical and complex issues from a historical perspective, offering an in-depth and multifaceted understanding of the political, economic, social and cultural developments that have influenced educational policy-making and practice. By doing so, the special issue aims to identify how education policy agendas have been constructed in Turkey in recent decades, by whom, for what purposes and with what consequences. The analysis incorporates developments outside of Turkey as well, since various contributions attempt to uncover how global structures, processes and agents have been transforming educational policies and programmes in the Turkish education system.

One of the pivotal developments that have influenced educational processes in Turkey in recent decades is the comprehensive curriculum reform of 2004. This reform aimed at redesigning the whole curriculum on the basis of constructivism and student-centred learning. In the first article, 'Democratising Turkey through SCP: Opportunities and pitfalls', Hülya Kosar Altinyelken explores the potentials and limitations of the SCP in terms of democratising learning in classrooms and contributing to

social democratisation. As Altinyelken notes, very few studies, among those that focus on the implementation of curriculum reforms in different countries, examine the relationship between the SCP and its potential for promoting democratic citizenship. Hence her article fills this gap within the context of Turkey. Based on interviews with teachers and school management at eight public primary schools, her research demonstrates that the discourse of SCP in terms of its aims at democratising learning by increasing student engagement has an appeal in Turkey, but the practice fails to meet expectations. The author suggests that although there are some favourable outcomes regarding the democratisation of learning, hierarchical and authoritarian social and political context of Turkey continues to be a determining factor for teacher and student attitudes.

The second article, 'Social change, competition and inequality: Macro societal patterns reflected in curriculum practices of Turkish schools', by Raşan Nazlı Somel and Arnd-Michael Nohl, analyses how the new curriculum was put into practice in a differentiated education system and in a heterogeneous Turkish society. They do not limit their analyses to school context; rather, they seek to address how curricular practices are related 'to the specifics of the teaching staff of schools, to the socio-geographical and socio-economic location of social milieux represented in schools, and to the school organizations themselves'. With this focus, they critically examine the ways in which competition and inequality are experienced and reproduced by different teachers, students and schools. They investigate curricular practices on the basis of field research in five schools (representative of rural-urban division and lower and middle-class differentiation) in two different regions of Turkey. The authors argue that fierce and unequal competition to enter high schools on the basis of standardised tests leads to varying classroom practices of teachers. This sometimes results in a complete negation of the curriculum for the sake of preparing pupils for tests in squatter-neighbourhood schools or adoption of the curriculum in rural schools where the pressure of competition is low compared to urban schools.

An important aspect of the curriculum reform was the introduction of new textbooks at all grades. The current state of the textbooks is overviewed by Kenan Çayır's article 'Citizenship, nationality and minorities in Turkey's textbooks: From politics of non-recognition to difference multiculturalism.' He uses the data collected in the 'Promoting Human Rights in Textbooks III Project' that involved the analysis of 245 textbooks taught in every subject in the 2012–2013 academic year. He considers the questions 'How is the national identity presented and constructed in the textbooks?' and 'Do ethnic, religious and language based minorities receive mention? If they do, how and in what context?' The importance of these questions lies in the political context of Turkey that has historically been characterised by the denial of the diverse character of the population. However, Turkey has witnessed the increasing claims of non-Muslim and non-Turkish minorities to equal citizenship in recent decades. Based on discourse analysis of textbooks, Çayır demonstrates that the current textbooks still promote an ethno-religious national narrative. He also critically examines the AKP's gestures towards the recognition of minorities such as the inclusion of elective non-Turkish languages into the curriculum or the incorporation of Alevism into textbooks. He argues that the AKP's conservative-Islamic multiculturalism signifies an inclusion on the basis of unequal social position for minorities.

The focus in Orhan Agirdag, Zeliha Yazici and Sven Sierens' paper, 'Trends in preschool enrolment in Turkey: Unequal access and differential consequences', moves to early childhood education. The authors investigate various aspects of

preschool education in Turkey, including the long-term trends in the preschool enrolment rate, the relation between preschool attendance and social class and gender, and the impact of early childhood education on future academic achievement. Based on data from the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) 2012 and World Bank EdStats, they provide an international comparative perspective on these themes and fill a research lacuna on this topic. They illustrate that although the preschool enrolment rate has dramatically increased after 2003, and reached 30% of pupils, Turkey still has the lowest rate of preschool attendance among industrialised or newly industrialised countries. They reveal that access to preschool is strongly determined by the social class background of pupils and is related to future academic success. This study draws our attention to the differential effects of preschooling: Wealthier families benefit more from preschool attendance than students from lower-middle-class and poor families. Hence this study has important implications for educational policy in Turkey as they suggest that without providing high-quality preschool education to lower class families, the increasing enrolment rate would also result in an increase in the level of social inequities in education.

In the next article, 'Progress towards providing good quality education for all in Turkey: A qualified success?', Nihan Köseleci tackles the issue of access to good quality education that is still a continuing challenge for Turkey. She suggests that Turkey has taken several steps over the past two decades in improving access to primary and lower secondary education. Enrolment ratios for these school years increased to near-universal levels by the mid-2000s. Despite these improvements, Turkey's performance in basic literacy skills (mathematics, reading and sciences) is still one full year behind the OECD average. Drawing mainly on the data collected by the MoNE and by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics between 1990 and 2012, Köseleci demonstrates that learning levels remain low and largely unequal across socio-economic strata, and disparities persist across regions, ethno-linguistic groups and socio-economic status. Hence her findings are in line with the previous article that underlines a strong relationship between socio-economic background and academic success. Her analysis provides a powerful account of the strengths and weaknesses of the Turkish education system.

In the final article, 'Academic and cultural experiences of covered women in Turkish higher education', Fatma Nevra Seggie deals with the Islamic headscarf issue that has become a global political, cultural and legal phenomenon. Seggie introduces the issue by outlining the ways in which various countries in Europe approach the wearing of the headscarf in schools and in broader society. In the Turkish context, the headscarf has been a public issue when undergraduate female students started to wear religious head coverings at university campuses during the 1980s in line with the revival of Islamic movements. It was conceived as a threat to secularism by the Higher Education Council and banned on campuses. It was only in 2013, following the third electoral victory of the AKP, that the headscarf ban was lifted. The author examines, through semi-structured interviews, the educational and cultural experiences of 12 covered women. These women constitute a heterogeneous group, some experienced the ban, some entered university after the ban and some returned after the ban. Seggie gives an interesting account of how Islamic and secularist perspectives interact and transform each other on university campuses. Whereas the secular nature of the campus seems to be liberating and empowering for the covered women, the campus has begun to include some Islamic components such as a ban on alcohol.

Emerging issues and patterns

Although the articles in this special issue focus on different aspects of education in Turkey, it is possible to detect common themes and patterns in them. One pattern concerning educational processes in Turkey relates to the global shift within education. Several studies in international scholarship indicate that there is an increasing convergence among educational systems in terms of adoption of constructivism, SCP and similar curricular subjects (Terra and Bromley 2012). The articles in this special issue illustrate that Turkey has taken part in this global convergence. Based on the analysis of recent educational reforms, the articles indicate that Turkey attempted to adopt SCP and to reform the school curriculum while revising the textbooks on the basis of constructivism. Several policy measures were also taken to increase preschool enrolment and to improve access to good quality education. Indeed, the articles point out progressive developments in areas such as primary and secondary school enrolment.

However, one common point emerges from the analysis of the authors: a glaring gap between policy intentions and implementations. The articles demonstrate how the educational policies fail to penetrate the challenging context of Turkey. They illustrate how the curriculum and SCP implementation practices go through a metamorphosis in the field. The new curriculum, for instance, is totally disregarded in some schools as a result of pressure for test-based examinations. Whereas the MoNE attempts to rewrite textbooks to adapt to the norms of the EU, the study on the textbooks shows that they are far from taking an inclusive perspective towards non-Muslim and non-Turkish minorities. Moreover, although the government made preschool education a national priority, the figures show that Turkey has a very low rate of preschooling compared to other countries on the basis of economic development. Therefore, the gap between policy and practice emerges as an important theme that needs to be addressed by future studies and tackled with by policy-makers.

Another important aspect referred to in various articles is the centralised nature of the Turkish education system. The articles illustrate how the system, from preschool to higher education, is centrally planned. This creates limited participation by the interested parties as well as conflicting tendencies in educational processes. For instance, the adoption of constructivist pedagogy requires the inclusion of local knowledge into the school context or textbooks. However, the textbooks and all kinds of educational content are centrally planned and distributed over the country. Such a centralised approach to education does not allow communities and educators to create their own educational materials, as is the case in many democratic societies. It could be argued that decentralising the education system, while being aware of the risk of Islamisation at the local level, might be one of the most important future challenges that the Turkish education system will face.

Moreover, the articles point to the issue of equity as they draw our attention to the strong relationship between socio-economic background and educational participation and academic success. They all point out the fact that educational processes in Turkey are characterised by deep economic, regional, ethnic and linguistic disparities. Schools are segregated by socio-economic status. Such disparities result in two major shortcomings. First, progressive steps such as the increasing school enrolment cannot be extended to disadvantaged regions and ethno-linguistic groups in Turkey. Second, reforms that aim to improve educational quality involve the danger of widening inequalities. The articles on preschool education and SCP, for instance, indicate that

students coming from upper socio-economic families had more access to preschool education and benefit more from SCP. Hence, as Altinyelken notes in her study, although SCP is a progressive pedagogical approach, it might end up reinforcing the inequalities in education for diverse socio-economic groups. Consequently, the articles in this special issue serve to remind us of the importance of developing particular policy measures to lessen social and educational inequalities.

We hope that this issue contributes to an understanding of the complex interplay of power, politics and educational processes, and gives an insight into current debates on topical issues such as curriculum implementation, SCP, early childhood education, the representation of the national identity and minorities in textbooks and the interaction between Islam and secularism in the Turkish context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributor

Dr Hülya Kosar Altinyelken is a senior lecturer and researcher at the Child Development and Education Department of the University of Amsterdam (UvA), the Netherlands. Her research engages with issues such as educational reforms, curriculum change, pedagogy and teachers. She is the co-editor of *Global Education Policy and International Development: New Agendas, Issues and Policies* and *Global Managerial Education Reforms and Teachers*. She has published in journals such as *International Journal of Educational Development*, *Journal of Education Policy*, *Comparative Education*, and *Research in Comparative and International Education*.

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