

Spring (2026) 2(1), (1-4)

<https://doi.org/10.30473/ns.2026.77816.1048>

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

From Social Constructivism to Social Identity Engineering in Türkiye's Education System during the Erdoğan Era (2002–2025)

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Receive Date: 24/Dec/2025

Revise Date: 22/Jan/2026

Accepted: 21/Feb/2026

Publish Date: 21/Mar/2026

How to cite

Baniadam, I. (2026). From Social Constructivism to Social Identity Engineering in Türkiye's Education System during the Erdoğan Era (2002–2025). *New Studies in Educational Sciences*, 2 (1), 1-4. (<https://doi.org/10.30473/ns.2026.77816.1048>)

ABSTRACT

This research examines the systematic transformation of Turkey's educational system during the Justice and Development Party era (2002–2025). The central issue is the transition from a learner-centered “social constructivist” framework to a state-led “social identity engineering” project under Erdoğan. Although the 2005 reforms emphasized active learning driven by global standards, policies shifted toward ideological alignment, religious nationalism, and moral conditioning after 2010, particularly post-2016. The objective of this article is to conduct a multi-level analysis of this transition and identify mechanisms of semantic redefinition within the pedagogical system. Utilizing a qualitative research design, this study examines 60 primary sources—including policy documents, international reports, and textbooks—through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that recent reforms do not signify the total abandonment of constructivism; rather, prior pedagogical techniques have been redefined within a new value-based framework titled “Virtue-Value-Action” to cultivate “desirable citizens.” Consequently, by proposing a three-layered model (international, institutional, and pedagogical), this research concludes that Turkey's educational changes represent a historical continuation of instrumentalism education for nation-building, characterized by heightened state control and content restructuring, serving as a cautionary tale for the critical analysis of educational concept redefinition in sensitive political contexts.

KEY WORDS

Social Constructivism, Social Engineering, Education System, Erdoğan, Türkiye.



Introduction

Education systems in contemporary societies serve as pivotal mechanisms through which states construct knowledge, identity, and social order (Apple, 2019). Turkey under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) between 2002 and 2025 represents a striking case of profound structural and discursive changes in education (Lindquist, 2017). Initially, the 2000s were characterized by constructivist reforms—notably the 2005 curriculum—aligned with EU standards and supported by the World Bank, emphasizing active learning, critical thinking, and learner-centered pedagogy (İnal et al., 2017). However, the political shift following 2010, accelerated by the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the 2016 coup attempt, redirected educational policy toward centralized control, neo-Ottoman/Islamic identity formation, and the cultivation of a “pious generation” (Can & Kaya, 2025). While existing literature highlights the expansion of Imam-Hatip schools and increased religious content, this study fills a gap by providing a comprehensive, multi-layered analysis that links political discourse, institutional dynamics, and pedagogical practice. It challenges the “sudden rupture” narrative, demonstrating that constructivist techniques were not abandoned but repurposed within a state-led “identity engineering” framework.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative design, integrating document analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative historical perspectives. The sample includes 60 primary sources: 25 national education policy documents (spanning 2004–2024), 25 international academic reports, and 10 representative textbooks in History, Social Studies, and Religious Education. The researcher reached theoretical saturation after analyzing approximately 80% of the documents. Data was coded using MAXQDA, with key themes including “constructivist pedagogy,” “national-religious identity,” and “value engineering.” To ensure reliability, inter-coder agreement was calculated ($Kappa = 0.81$), indicating robust consistency. Acknowledging methodological constraints—such as the absence of direct classroom observation—this study treats concepts like “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1990) as theoretical signifiers rather than empirically measured variables, maintaining a balanced and defensible analytical stance.

Results

Educational transformation in Turkey occurred through an additive, four-level process:

1. **Political Discourse:** A clear shift from the 2000s rhetoric of “modernization and EU integration” to the post-2016 focus on “national-religious unity” and the “Turkish Century” (Erdoğan, 2019, 2021).
2. **Educational Policy:** The 2005 constructivist reforms were gradually reconfigured. The 2024 “Turkey Century Maarif Model” explicitly prioritizes a “Virtue-Value-Action” framework, where “critical thinking” is subordinated to moral and national identity objectives (MEB, 2024).
3. **Institutional Structures:** Increased centralization, exemplified by the expansion of Imam-Hatip schools and heightened state oversight regarding appointments and curriculum control (Buyruk, 2021).
4. **Pedagogical Approaches:** The emergence of a “heterogeneous hybrid model.” While collaborative and project-based techniques—the hallmarks of constructivism—remain visible, they are now utilized to transmit normative, state-sanctioned moral messages rather than fostering independent inquiry.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study argues that the transformation of the Turkish education system is an intensification of a long-standing pattern of state identity engineering, rather than a departure from it. Both the Kemalist and the AKP regimes have instrumentalized education; the difference lies in the definition of the “desired citizen.” To explain this transition, the study proposes a three-layered causal mechanism:

- **Layer 1 (International, 2000s):** EU and World Bank pressures fostered constructivist adoption.
- **Layer 2 (Institutional, post-2010):** Domestic centralization and the removal of dissenting voices created an environment conducive to state ideology.
- **Layer 3 (Pedagogical, post-2016):** The semantic redefinition of constructivist tools (e.g., “active learning”) into instruments for ideological socialization.

The research concludes that the Turkish education system has successfully established the structural conditions for the potential internalization of state-sanctioned values. However, as cautioned by Bourdieu (1990), whether this constitutes an actual transformation of student “habitus” remains a question for future longitudinal field research. The Turkish experience serves as a warning to global policymakers: in competitive authoritarian contexts, progressive pedagogical language can be preserved formally while its core content is repurposed for ideological ends.

Funding

This research received no specific funding from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit agency.

Authors’ Contribution

The sole author was responsible for the study’s conceptualization, methodology, data collection, analysis, writing, and final approval of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express gratitude to all researchers whose scholarly works contributed to the theoretical and empirical foundations of this study.

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