



The Educational Thought Of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

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ABSTRACT

Among the modern Muslim thinkers, reformers and revivalists the Turkish born Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960 AD) is one of the most influential of the modern Turkey. His life span covers one of the turbulent and most significant periods of the world. The period witnessed two World Wars, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire giving birth to Republic of Turkey, the continuing colonization of Muslim lands, the emergence of major ideologies such as Communism, Capitalism and Nationalism, and major movements like atheism, materialism, and anarchism and above the rise of age of scienticism. Amidst all these developments the multidimensional thought of Said Nursi penned in his magnum opus *Risale-i Nur* assumes significance. Here in this paper the author focus on the historical background, contours and impact of the educational thought of Said Nursi. It will essentially be a desk research. *Risale-i Nur* of Said Nursi will serve as the primary source.

Keywords: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, modern Turkey, Ottoman Empire, *Risale-i Nur*, Educational philosophy.

Introduction

According to Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is among the leading intellectuals of the Muslim world in the league of Jamal al-Din Afghani, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, Muhammad Iqbal et al.¹ He has been equally influential and written on the various facets of Islamic thought. The paper will, however, restrict itself to Said Nursi's thought on education. Around the world various thinkers and educationists have emerged from time to time and each defined education from their own point of view. In the Muslim world too, many scholars and educationists emerged and contributed to this field, inspired from the Islamic epistemological framework. From Ghazali, Farabi and ibn Taymiya in early centuries to Maulana Maududi, Naquib al-Attas and Fazlur Rahman in the modern times, all tried to engage with the idea of education in the respective contexts. Among the modern Muslim thinkers the Turkish born Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960 AD) is unique in his course of action and methodology who was not only an educationist but also a reformer, a theologian, a thinker and a revivalist.

Said Nursi was born in a Kurdish village of Nurs (for the reason he is known as Nursi) near Bitlis in eastern Anatolia. He began his education at the age of nine in Hizan. After finishing his formal education he visited a number of places and ultimately in 1890 took up residence in Bitlis. Later on he moved to Van where he wanted to develop an Islamic university on the shores of Lake Van. During the First World War, Van fell to the Russian invasion. Said Nursi was arrested and taken as war captive. He spent about two years in Siberia. During the course he had a very interesting encounter with commander of the Russian forces. It is said that he was ordered to be executed by the commander because of not showing respect to him. Nursi's companions tried to persuade him to offer an apology, but he did not concede. Only desire he made was to be allowed to make two *rakat salah* before being killed. The strength of character and faith greatly influenced the Russian commander, who came forward and told Ustad Bediuzzaman that he had cancelled his orders and that he respected the views of Ustad Nursi. Said Nursi's life and thought had two phases; *Old Said* i.e. the phase before the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of Turkish republic in 1923. During this phase, Nursi tried to support preservation and modernization Ottoman Empire. *New Said* i.e. the phase after the collapse of Ottoman Empire and with the founding of Turkish republic, begins with 1923 till his death. Nursi died on March 23rd 1960 in Urfa, a place where he had a majority of followers. After a military coup in 1960, the army authorities fearing that his tomb might become a place of political importance secretly

removed remains of his dead body from Urfa to an unknown place. Here a brief of his biography was presented as vast literature is already present on this aspect.²

In order to put his thought in context it is pertinent to recognize the milieu of Said Nursi. Nursi's thought nourished at the time when the Ottoman Empire was at the verge of decline. In fact he also witnessed the final phase of the decline. Having lived through one of the most significant periods in recent history, Nursi witnessed and participated in key events that affected the world. These include two World Wars, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire which gave birth to the secular Republic of Turkey, the continuing colonization of Muslim lands, the partition of the Muslim world after gaining independence through nationalist ideologies, the emergence of major ideologies such as Communism and Capitalism, and major movements like atheism, materialism, and anarchism and conflict between religion and science. In short, the entire globe was re-shaped during the years covering Nursi's life span. Serif Mardin, one of the prominent Turkish sociologist, political scientist, academic and thinker, while representing the personality of Said Nursi says: "I consider Said Nursi's thought to be one of the foremost assemblages of important ideas among Islamic thinkers. It is not simply Nursi's intellectualism and piety that touch the reader, but the deep human respect inherent in his ideas."³

The then Existing Education System and Said Nursi's Worldview

Said Nursi was not satisfied with the system of Education prevalent at that time in Turkey. Education was mostly offered through dual institutions; *mekteb* and *medrese*. The system offered by the former was western oriented, with a focus on positivist approach to sciences, whereas the latter institution gave precedence to classical Islamic education. During this time there was no system of education in the country offering both scientific and religious training. *Mekatib* and *medaris*, as the places of popular education at that time seemed to carry pride in their separate curricula, each being critical of the other. Nursi was deeply troubled with this schism. It is worthy of consideration that efforts of Said Nursi were against the secularization process transpiring in Turkey in his time. He was of the firm belief that these satanic processes weakened and took away the faith of Muslim society, which gave them power and energy to fight and struggle against all satanic efforts. It was Mustafa Kemal's, the father of modernization and westernization in Turkey, declared aim "to achieve an unconditional transformation to Western civilization," and to build a modern nation-state. Such a project required the rapid modernization, westernization, and therefore secularization of Turkey. To make this process easy Kemal brought a radically reformed "national" education system, the function of which was to inculcate "universal, humanist, secular, positivist" principles. His intention was to eliminate all existing religious identities, and create a uniform secular, nationalist identity.⁴ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi declared an intellectual and spiritual war against all these dangerous propagandas by trying to reconstruct the educational settings through faith and religious values. Nursi who himself excelled in *medrese* education, realized the need to improve himself in the sciences of the time to find answers to many questions. He often expressed his disillusionment towards traditional religious scholars whose discussion could not provide solutions to the major problems of the time. Nursi was convinced that religion did not consist solely of faith matters but due to its comprehensiveness it is also connected with world of science including sociology, politics and economics.⁵

Bediuzzaman felt that existing Educational system was not addressing the need of the society, it was rather furthering gap between two sections of the society, intelligentsia of religious and that of modern sciences. In addition, both the streams had misunderstandings about each other. In his view, students of the modern education system should be trained in religious subjects, and similarly, products of the religious schools should be well equipped with the modern trend of the world, so that the two sections of the society could have enough opportunity to understand both the sciences utilizing their skills. The main purpose of his initiative was to produce a sincere and committed Muslim citizen in order to get rid of the crisis of the Muslim intelligentsia and to develop science and technology in the Muslim world. The main purpose of his project, 'Medresetu'z-Zehra' was also the reconciliation of religious sciences and secular knowledge. He states it clearly:

"The people of (medrasah) religious schools accuse the people of modern schools of weakness of belief due to their outward appearance. The people of modern schools regard the people of religious schools as insufficient and ignorant because they do not know about the new branches of science. The differences in the views and methods unsettled the Islamic ethics and prevented people from contemporary civilization. The only solution to this is to teach religious sciences properly in modern schools, to teach new branches of exact sciences instead of ancient Greek philosophy, which is unnecessary now, in religious schools and to have very competent scholars in dervish lodges. When they are realized, those three branches will develop in harmony and reach high ranks."⁶

For Nursi the main purpose of learning of science is to understand the Qur'an and prove its truths. Understanding of the Qur'an should be the main aim and purpose of learning science and object of life. Thus the Qur'anic miraculous nature should become the guide, teacher and master for the entire humanity. He played a significant role in the transformation of Turkish society. Like many educated Muslims, Said Nursi was not satisfied with the alternatives represented by both the new secularist westernizing visionaries, new secular intellectuals and the traditionalists who failed to comprehend the nature of change in all its

dimensions. He criticized existing institutions and mentalities and worked to provide an authentic alternative, Islamic and modern approach to meet the challenges of the times.

Medresetu'z-Zehra Model

Said Nursi gave the opinion of unifying educational system by presenting his Medresetu'z-Zehra proposal. He proposed that religious and modern sciences to be thought in an integrated way. This will eliminate the conflict and will bring moderation and balance into education. This proposal of Said Nursi is called as Medresetu'z-Zehra project. For the proper comprehension of the religion, knowledge of all the subjects is necessary. But at the same time Nursi grants religion a position of primacy over all types of sciences. He argued that Islam is the master and guide of the sciences, and the chief and father of all true knowledge. This led him to evolve his own scheme of ideal system of education. For integration of knowledge, his view is that religious sciences are taught in the new secular schools (*mektebs*) and that the positive sciences are taught in the religious schools (*medreses*). He argued that if the students are taught in this method, those in the secular schools will be saved from being without religion, while those in the religious schools will be saved from bigotry.⁷

A fine combination of scientific and religious sciences as envisaged by Nursi can be observed from the conclusion he draws:

“The Religious sciences are the light of the conscience and the modern sciences i.e. sciences of civilization are the light of the reason; the truth becomes manifest through the combination of the two. The student's endeavor will take flight on these two wings. When they are separated it gives rise to bigotry in the one, and wiles and skepticism in the other.”⁸

He wanted to integrate the science of modern times with Islamic thought. But his theory of integration was to be based on the new exegesis of the Qur'an to be written, almost exclusively, in the light of the findings of modern science, and he tried to put it into practice with an added enthusiasm. Thus, the integration of religious and modern sciences was the tool used by Said Nursi to revitalize the Muslim culture and tradition. Here also the faith and religious values of students were main concerns of Nursi. One of his most important views related to education is the approach of uniting religion and sciences. He says:

“We should mould the science brought from Europe and America, which, in fact, belongs to Islam, with the light of oneness and view it from the point of view of the contemplation and signified meaning mentioned by the Qur'an, that is, on behalf of its maker and master”.⁹

Nursi's views on unifying educational system by his Medresetu'z-Zehra approach are original and unique. Many argue that the unique civilizational features of Medresetu'z-Zehra model make it a most suitable and culturally viable model for Muslims in its global perspective as well. His views that religious subjects should be taught in the secular schools (*mektebs*) and the positive science in the religious schools (*medreses*) so that the structure of secular education are salvaged from irreligious behaviour and the religious schools from bigotry, are very progressive. Moreover, his views about integration of science and theology with education are very futuristic and rewarding given the pathetic situations of Muslims in educational field worldwide

Said Nursi's proposal to Abdul Hamid II

To give practical shape to his thoughts and ideas on Educational reforms Said Nursi went to Istanbul at the end of the year 1907 to present his proposals before the Sultan, Abdul Hamid II. According to Sukran Vahide, Nursi's intention in returning to the Ottoman capital was to try to gain official support for his ideas of an Islamic University, the Medresetu'z-Zehra in eastern Anatolia, Serif Mardin, however, suggests that it was Nursi's desire to present a series of reform proposals to the Sultan which prompted him to move to Istanbul.¹⁰ However, Nursi's stay in Istanbul and his activities from the end of 1907 to the middle of 1908 as well as his conversation with the Doctor suggests that his main concern was the propagation of his Medresetu'z-Zehra project, for which he worked so tirelessly till as late as 1950. Another intention was also ‘to engage with a broader spectrum of scholars, intellectuals and politicians there. Istanbul was the heart of Ottoman intelligentsia, the center of Muslim world and an important axis in the world's power balance.’¹¹

Unfortunately, Said Nursi was not allowed to talk to the Sultan. Sefik Pasha, the Minister of Internal Affairs, however, talked to him. Said Nursi did not regard this talk sufficient. He expressed his views through articles in the newspapers and his speeches. He wanted the Sultan to give importance to education instead of establishing cavalry troops and to spend the taxes collected from people on treating ignorance, the illness of the nation. He gave great importance to expressing the intense need of the community for education because “the nation thirsts for a new education system that complies with Islam”.¹² Finally with the active support of the Governor of Van and Bitlis, Tahir Pasha, Nursi was introduced to the Sultan. According to Sukran Vahide it was Ferik Ahmad Pasha, the Major General, with whom Nursi stayed for two months, who may have assisted him in preparing the petition seeking support for his educational projects in Kurdistan to be presented to the Palace and secure the necessary introduction. However the actual presentation did not take place till May or June 1908. However, Nursi's suggestion for reform in the existing educational system of the time under Abdul Hamid II, were not appreciated. His bold denunciation of the policies of Sultan evoked strong reaction amongst the State authorities. He was sent to a mental hospital for presenting “this much courage” which was not found to be “comfortable with sanity” by the officials.¹³ Later in 1911 Nursi finally convinced Sultan Mohd Resad about the greater need of establishing a university in the Eastern provinces.

He was given the initial amount of a thousand gold liras in advance out of the nineteen thousand gold liras allotted to the proposed university. Constructions had started on a site on the shores of Lake Van at Edremit in 1913. But due to the outbreak of the First World War shortly afterward and non-payment of the rest of the promised funds and the apathy of the Ministry of the Pious Foundations, despite the favorable response from the Grand Vizir's Office, construction was halted and it never resumed.¹⁴

Science and Religion

One of the means of educational reforms to Said Nursi was to initiate a dialogue between science and religion. He considered theology as scientific in character and hence, it shared at least in part, the same domain as the natural sciences. He is challenging to develop a theological understanding of nature that relies on both modern science and Islamic truths. Nursi believes that "the conscience is illuminated by the religious sciences, and the mind is illuminated by the physical sciences and wisdom occurs through the combination of these two."¹⁵ In this model the distinction between transmitted and speculative sciences is clear but the combination of both is a strong necessity. Nursi has his own interest in retrieving a sense of cooperation between science and religion. Nursi's model of religious intercourse rejects any forms of scientism, whether in the form of materialism, naturalism, negative philosophy, atheism or communism.

The Human concept has two important faculties, the brain-mind-intellect and Heart conscious-spirituality. According to Nursi the former, i.e. mind is breasted with physical sciences and latter, the consciousness with religious sciences. If the first is missing, fanaticism will emerge and if religious sciences are missing, then doubts and cunningness will emerge. Said Nursi was not against the science but was against the scientism. Nursi encouraged his students to be investigative in any issue related to either religion or science. He stated that no aspect of Islam was contrary to reason. On the contrary, it was possible to prove and explain all its aspects rationally. In the beginning of an early work, entitled *Muhakemat* (Reasoning), Nursi paid a lot of attention to the importance of reason, saying "If the speculative and transmitted sciences conflict, the speculative sciences should be taken as basic and the transmitted sciences interpreted".¹⁶ This means that if revelation appears to conflict with reason then reason should be taken as the basis and revelation should be interpreted, but in such a case, according to him reason must be genuine. He insisted on "truth instead of bigotry, proof instead of false arguments, and reason instead of natural disposition; and warned "do not be deceived by embellished claims; ask for proof!"¹⁷ In describing "degrees of the mind," he says: "First is imagining, then conception, then reasoned thought." He thought reasoning across religious boundaries was possible. The nature and implications of reasoning inevitably become prominent in his discourse. For him, Islam considers everything through reason and thought. Attaining to 'belief by affirmation' or verification is tied to the condition of using reason; he sees reasoned thought and investigation as a precondition of affirmation, and belief without reason as "bigotry". He declares man to be "unbiased in using his reason" and defends freedom of thought against objections such as, "the more I use my reason, the more doubts I have; it's better not to think too much".¹⁸ He emphasized the importance of reason, the greatness of the modern sciences of civilization and the power of free choice. He believed reason would find a way "to persuade the deniers" to believe. Reason alone has human limitations: here commended "opening the door to reason, but not taking the will from it. Religion based only on reason or emotion cannot reach God, he thought; it only leads to an embodying of God, or claiming partnership with Him, or materialism. On the other hand religion without reason is according to him fruitless and deficient. Elsewhere he states that belief is attained through reason's power of choice. For he thought if knowledge lacks the insight of the heart, it is ignorance. Taking the part of something is one thing, belief is something else. It is important to note that Nursi also believed in the necessity of specializing in science. He thought one person could specialize at most in a few subjects but not in all; trying to learn everything means not learning them at all. He also makes the point; however, that specialization should come after a general knowledge of all. That is to say that Nursi was of the opinion that splitting your mind into compartments is necessary, one for religious faith and practice, another for scientific or ideological, another for professional expertise. However, he thought all this is to be done under the comprehensiveness of religious faith. The philosophy of his thought can be judged by the following statement:

"If you have a watch to be repaired, you don't go to Imam you go to watch maker. The ability is central here, similarly in the case of electing a ruler, ability should be decisive matter not piousness. If a pious and able person is there, it is good otherwise competent should be elected."¹⁹ Prof. Dr. Alparslan Açıkgenç of Fatih University Turkey while commenting on Nursi's use of Science in his writings says, "The concept of science (*fann or ilm*) is among the key terms used in the writings of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, known as the *Risale-i Nur* Collection. There are some reasons why he pays close attention to sciences and scientific advancement especially in our age. ... Nursi tried to modify the concept of science as used in his time. This modification was developed through his understanding of the Qur'anic term '*ilm*'. In this way he tried to show that the Islamic conception of science is not only invested with an ethical dimension which lays a religious responsibility on the scientist, but also it has an inner meaning in the sense that science is conceived to reveal the way of God's acts in the universe as we perceive them."

Impact: (i) Rise of Faith Based Muslim Consciousness

His contribution in building the Islamic personality, Islamic vision and Islamic awakening in Turkey has been enormous and colossal. Said Nursi fully shared in the vision of other Muslim reformers and activists in the establishment of an Islamic Community in the model society of Madinah al-Munawwarah. However, his approach towards social change was very much different.

Nursi's goal was the survival of Islam as a living text, one possessing in daily experiences, without the support of political means and traditional pillars such as the Sufi lodges. After identifying the enemies of Islam as ignorance, friction, and poverty, Nursi presented education, hard work, and consensus as a solution. Nursi's interpretation of Islam is personal, with the goal of constructing micro level morality by raising religious consciousness. His writings constantly try to build a pious and modern Muslim personality, one that is tolerant but firm about the core virtues of Islam. The mature Nursi of the Republican era saw his mission as safeguarding the Islamic religious and cultural underpinnings of Turkish identity. He also aimed to rejuvenate this identity by addressing some of the legitimate shortcomings that critics and intellectuals had pointed to in the late Ottoman period. The Kemalists' ultimate objective was to transform the consciousness of the new Republic's citizens by constructing a secular and national identity that was as devoid as possible of links to the Ottoman-Islamic past. In response to this project, Nursi struggled to create an alternative inner religious community, articulated in the household and formed through face-to-face relationships without requiring potentially hazardous outward demonstrations in the political sphere. To a large degree, this shift corresponded to the one Nursi underwent himself, from outward activism to withdrawal into the inner sanctum of a contemplative Islam. By stressing religious consciousness, which need not be manifested outwardly, Nursi ought to preserve an inner spiritual sphere free from the destruction of state policy. Nursi defined freedom in terms of his project of creating an inner community. He argued that the government only could prosecute an individual who actively broke the antireligious laws with his hands and would find it difficult to interfere in the household, heart, and private realm of the individual citizen and believer.²⁰ He thus gave a central role to the concepts of *iman* (faith) and *insaan* (person) rather than to the concept of power.

(ii) Nur Movement and its Influence

Nur Movement is a religious movement in Turkey based on the writings of Said Nursi. They promoted the concept of the Qur'an as a living document which needed to be continually reinterpreted. Serif Mardin commenting on the nature of the movement's boundaries writes:

"The social characteristics of its earliest following, just as those of its present votaries, are difficult to pinpoint. Since it does not operate on the model of a traditional Islamic sect, but claims it is a medium for the dissemination of the truth of the *Qur'an*, its boundaries are diffuse: every person who joins in the task of dissemination is *ipso facto* a disciple. There are no initiation rites and there is no formal organizational structure; a precise count of the membership is, thus, impossible".²¹

The Nurcu groups have evolved into the most powerful and effective socio-political communities in contemporary Turkey. The writings of Said Nursi, particularly his magnum opus, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyati* (RNK), constitute the base of this faith movement. Nursi's work has marked Islamic political discourse indelibly, offering original ideas for addressing political and socio-cultural problems. By studying the Nur community, one can understand the dynamics of religion and state on the one hand and modernity and identity on the other. The Nur groups' dynamism as a social movement is rooted in their network of media, education, business, and publishing establishments. The text-based nature of the movement makes it unique; since Nursi's death in 1960, no one has succeeded him, and the movement remains very much centred on his writings. This focus has resulted in a new idiom of communication and a new message of moral and ethical renewal for society. The Nur movement's emphasis on text naturally has resulted in its involvement in the publishing and printing businesses.

The RNK has become the tool that pulls diverse groups together. In derhanes, reading is evolving into a kind of large-scale community formation with a number of social activities that consolidate social ties. In the urbanizing society of Turkey, people are isolated and search for ways to connect with other people. Reading the same book and internalizing the same vocabulary play an important role in connecting people. Through collective readings, Nurcus learn a new normative charter of action that shapes their understanding of the world and serves as a basis for action. These beliefs inform what actions are good and desirable and what are to be avoided. Placing Nursi's writings into the prevailing discourses of that period suggest a connection between the text and author. However, Nursi's followers read the books to answer current questions. Nursi's message therefore is reproduced within the challenges of the present time. This recoding of Nursi's narrative takes place either in interpretive circles or in commentary books. Since mass production of books contextualizes knowledge, the reading or listening audience tends to give new meanings to what they read or hear. They engage in the complex process of recoding messages, through which internalization takes place.²²

CONCLUSION

Throughout the Islamic history a number of scholars worked on different aspects of Knowledge within Islamic tradition. All these scholars combined the spiritual and rational disciplines in their own education

and became experts in many fields. For example, Imam Suyuti was a specialist in many branches of knowledge, such as Tafseer, Hadith and Islamic law; syntax, semantics, Oratory, Aesthetics, and Lexicology. We can enumerate thousands of learned scholars such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Syed Sharif al-Jurjani, Imam al-Ghazali, Al-Biruni and Jabir bin al-Hayan as examples of this powerful tradition. In the history of civilization the period from 8th to 16th century is known as the period of Islamic Civilization, yet after this period, especially following the 17th century, while Europe was progressing rapidly in philosophy, natural sciences and technology, the modern schools, *madrastas* and Sufi lodges were becoming separated from each other day by day. In this process the *madrastas* were beginning to become the centres of religious disciplines, while the modern schools were becoming the centres of positive sciences. The changes brought about by this shift of emphasis and disintegration in education were reflected in military, commercial, and other areas of social life, causing a decrease in highly-qualified men and the consequent falling behind of the Islamic world. It is a clear fact that Ottoman Empire, one of the long sustained empires of the Muslim world, was declining during the second half of the 19th century and its rule ended fully in 1923 when Republic Turkey came into existence under the leadership of Mustafa Kamal. Education had direct impact on the declining cause of this empire.

When we examine the history of the ending years of the Ottoman Empire we observe a sort of confusion in the ideology and methodology of the education. The educational reforms started by Sultan Abdul Hamid II and his associates were mainly revolving around the concepts of Ottomanism, westernization and Turkification of society. These concepts had impacted the scholars, rulers as well as the common people. An anxiety was developing in the Turkish society in particular and the Muslim world in general. In these circumstances the role of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is not only important but unique as well. Nursi reserved very optimistic view that education will help to overcome the ignorance. He was of the firm belief that Education causes to make political, social and economical change. It also helps to reconstruct social system and reexamination of the one's ideologies. Education helps to understand others, to adjust world society, decrease intolerance and through this chance of conflict will decrease.²³ Thus, Nursi's emphasis on educational reforms. Nursi's proposal of Medresetu'z-Zehra directly influenced the Turkish society and it also took away their doubts. The growing fanaticism in religious institutions and positivism in schools almost came to an end, the gap between the religion and state was tackled. The teachings of Nursi have fully influenced the Turkish society. At the same time his teachings have attracted the world scholars and reformers from east as well as from west. If we observe the present scenario of Muslim world it resembles to what it was of Turkey at the time of Said Nursi. We see that Muslim world is bifurcated into the different sects and sub sects, which not only differ in their views but are also hostile to one another than to their enemies. If there is implementation of Nursi's thought in the present Muslim world there are great chances of peace and prosperity. Nursi's teachings can play an important role in shaping the modern discourse on education. Syed Farid al-Attas in his latest book *Sociological Theory Beyond the Canon* while listing Said Nursi among the ten most important Muslim educationists argues that these thinkers can play an important role in shaping the Islamic epistemological alternative against the Eurocentric western hegemonic discourse on education.²⁴

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