

School Choice and Educational Segregation in the Privatization Process of Education in Turkey

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Abstract

Privatization of education has expanded dramatically worldwide in the last two decades, and Turkey is no exception. It is seen that the developments affecting the transformation of public services began with the implementation of neoliberal education policies, especially after the 1980s. These policies have led to a significant transformation in the field of education. After this period, the field of education, which was offered as a public service, began to be increasingly privatized. This process, which causes significant effects in all areas of education, shows that the privatization of education also has a significant impact on school choice processes. The main problem of this research is to try to understand the appearance of the segregations in education that arise due to school choice processes and the possible effects of educational segregations. Therefore, this research aims to focus on school choices, educational segregation, and the possible effects of this process during the privatization of education in Turkey. As a result of the research, it was revealed that exam scores and the distance from the school to home were the most determining factors in school choice for students studying in public high schools. Therefore, it can be said that there is a compulsory school choice process for students studying in public high schools. It is seen that students and parents studying in private high schools choose qualified private schools with high academic success due to the aim of accessing a qualified education. Parents' view of education as an investment and deficiencies in public education are other important factors in choosing a private school. Among the important results revealed by this research study is that school choice leads to students accessing schools of different qualities, deepening educational disparities depending on class position and educational inequalities.

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Introduction

Everything is for sale now. Even areas of life that we once considered sacred, such as health and education...

All for sale now (Maude Barlow)

School choice generally refers to a preference for certain schools (Burgess et al., 2014). It can be said that in school transitions, the school is determined not only by choice but also by reasons arising from necessity. An examination of how school choice is made - Is it a choice or a necessity?-, how and on what basis students are distributed to schools of different types and levels, and the effects and consequences of this distribution on students shows that it is not possible for everyone to have equal access to educational opportunities (Bernal, 2005; Reinoso, 2008).

It is among the strong claims that school choice, along with the privatization of education, is closely related to dominant market forces and especially the mechanisms of social class reproduction (Ball, 2003). It is seen that the gradual increase in private schooling makes the income level of families more visible as an important factor in the school choice process. While private schooling has led to the emergence of schools with different qualities, on the other hand, it has led to differences in the quality of education and opportunities between schools providing public education services, and this has led to a further increase in segregation in education (Karsten, 2010).

According to the regulation in the high school transition system in Turkey, those who have sufficient exam scores have to choose "qualified" high schools, and those whose exam scores are not sufficient have to choose "unqualified" high schools. In addition, it is seen that among those who do not have the right to enter "qualified" high schools, those who have financial means prefer to study in private high schools. In this context, it is seen that especially poor students who cannot obtain sufficient scores in the exam for various reasons experience a school choice process in which their choice rights are limited. Therefore, it is possible to claim that neoliberal education policies have given the right to a choice with "no choice". Undoubtedly, this situation also points out that the criticisms regarding equality of opportunity are justified. It can be said that this system based on hierarchical structuring at the secondary education level is the source of class separation for

students in terms of their income. In this context, school choice processes, which are among the important factors in terms of educational segregation, are becoming increasingly related to determinants such as the exam preparation process, which is closely related to the marketization of education, in countries such as Turkey, where school transitions depend on central exams.

As a result of many studies, it has been revealed that, as a result of the school choice process, the distribution of the student population in schools has become increasingly homogeneous, and schools have begun to separate according to ethnic and class origin. A study (Saporito, 2014) shows that white families avoid schools with higher percentages of non-white students when choosing schools, and similarly, wealthy families avoid schools with higher poverty rates. According to the results of the research, the preferences of white and wealthier students lead to increased racial and economic segregation in the neighborhood schools from which these students are separated. It also shows that school choice policies can worsen educational conditions for disadvantaged students who are left behind in local public schools. Other research results (Houston & Henig, 2023) show that many types of school choice tend to worsen rather than improve pre-existing patterns of racial, ethnic, and economic segregation.

Depending on the differentiation between schools, it is also seen that school choice has a largely decisive role in the future educational lives of students (Angus, 2015). School choice, which has a largely decisive role in students' current and future lives, should be seen as an important issue that should be rethought and discussed along with the privatization of education. When the relevant literature is examined, it is seen that the research on the school choice process in Turkey is insufficient and there is a need for further research on this subject. The question of what effect increasing private schooling along with the privatization of education has on this process, especially depending on the class position, remains an important issue. From this point of view, the main problem of this research is to try to understand the appearance of the segregations that occur due to school choice processes in education and the possible effects of educational segregations. Therefore, this research aims to focus on school choice, educational segregation, and the possible effects of this process during the privatization of education in Turkey.

Method¹

Research Design

This research was designed in a survey model (Neuman, 2014). A qualitative method approach was adopted in this research study.

Research Participants

The study group for this research consisted of students and their parents studying at the secondary school level in Ankara in the 2018–2019 academic year. To reach the students and their parents in the study group, the "purposive sampling" technique, which is among the non-probability sampling types among qualitative sampling types (Balçı, 2018, p. 103-105), was used. Until data saturation was achieved, in-depth interviews were conducted by the researcher with a total of 36 people: 18 parents and 18 students.

Research Instrument and Procedure

In-depth interview technique was used to collect research data. The research data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher. Additionally, validity and reliability studies of the research were conducted. While the interview form was being prepared, it was submitted for expert opinion, and pilot applications were carried out. After the ethics committee report and research permission were obtained, the interviews were completed on a voluntary basis.

¹ In this research, data from the dissertation titled "Privatization Policies in Education in Turkey After 1980 According to the Opinions of Secondary School Students and Their Parents in Ankara", completed under the supervision of Dr. Hasan Hüseyin Aksoy, was used.

Data Analysis

The research data were analyzed using the descriptive analysis approach, one of the qualitative data analysis methods. A framework for data analysis has been drawn. According to this framework, the themes under which the data will be organized and presented have been determined. Data were processed according to the thematic framework. After coding, the findings were defined and interpreted. During the analysis process, the frequency and percentage values of the distribution of the participants' opinions were also calculated, and comments were made based on these ratios. Direct quotes from the participants' opinions were made where necessary. In accordance with the ethical rules of the research, the opinions of the participants were included by coding them under pseudonyms by the researcher.

Results

The Role of Exam Scores in School Choice

According to the research findings, all of the students and their parents who chose public high schools stated that the exam score was the determining factor in their school choice. Students studying in public high schools expressed the impact of exam scores on their school choice as follows: "The high schools I had in mind were different. This place was not even on my mind. I didn't even know that such a high school existed. But after the high school entrance exam, the exam was very difficult for me. ...I had to choose this place" (Ela). Ferhunde, whose child is studying at a public high school, explained the impact of exam scores on her child's school choice as follows: "We wanted a qualified school close to our home, but the exam score was not enough to choose this school. We had to choose another school close to our home."

Among the research findings, the prominent opinions of students studying in public high schools are that "the school choice is not suitable for them" and "it is suitable, but they want to study in a better high school". In addition, it is seen that families think in parallel with the students. Ayşe, one of the students, expressed these views as follows: "I think the school choice is not suitable for me. Because I was a student who wanted a social sciences high school... I could not choose this school because my exam score was not sufficient."

According to the research findings, it is seen that students' exam scores are also effective in choosing a private school. Some of the parents stated that they chose a private school because their child's exam score was low. Parents express the impact of exam scores as follows: “My son did not get very high scores in the high school entrance exam. Therefore, he could not go to a qualified public high school. Yes, he could go to an average Anatolian high school, but when we researched the schools he could attend, we thought we should not choose these schools.” (Jülide). Zeynep and Onur, who studied in private high schools, expressed their private high school choice process as follows because they could not choose a qualified high school due to their low exam scores. Zeynep: “My exam score was low. That's why I chose a private school.” Onur: “When I couldn't get a good score in the exam and my old school gave me a scholarship, I chose to stay at this school. Because there was no better option.” Based on the participants' statements, it can be said that the privatization of education reproduces the educational inequalities that arise during school choice processes depending on exam scores and parents' income levels.

The Effect of the Distance of the School from Home on the School Choice Process

According to the research findings, it is seen that the distance of the school from home and easy transportation are important factors after the exam score for students and families studying in public high schools when choosing a school. Participants expressed their opinions on this issue as follows: “The main reason why I chose this place is that the location is very good, it is close to my home, and I can go to my home easily in terms of transportation.” (Çağlar), “Transportation was easy” (Seda).

It can be said that the fact that parents give priority to the school being close to home when choosing a school brings with it the obligation for students studying in public high schools to study in a school they do not want. Sinem expresses the influence of her family on her school choice as follows: “My family wanted me to go to this school because it was close. Purely for the road. They wanted this school because they didn't want me to go to school by bus. Otherwise, I would have gone to another school.” The research findings also reveal that the tendency of parents whose children are studying in public high schools to want a school close to their homes is an obstacle for girls and low-income students to study in a school they want or in qualified schools far from their

homes. Zehra did not choose schools in other regions far from her home because her child was a girl and her income level was low. Zehra expresses this situation as follows:

There was another school in Çankaya. There was a science high school in Elmadağ. We could also choose them, but since my financial situation was not good, I could not send them to those schools. We chose it because the school here is close and there is only one bus to and from the school. Let my daughter be in front of my eyes. I wanted her to study at the nearby school.

In this context, according to the research findings, it can be said that the difference in quality between schools at the secondary education level has an effect on the inability of every student to access qualified schools close to their homes. When public schools are examined more closely, research findings show that students studying in public high schools have to choose a school close to their homes with the address-based registration system, which leads them to access schools with different qualities. It can be said that the increasing segregation between regions due to economic inequality also leads to qualitative differentiation between schools, which has an impact on this situation.

Private School Choice as the New Education Strategy of the Middle Class

According to the research findings, it has been revealed that students studying in private high schools within the scope of the research and their families have various reasons (parents' ideology, beliefs, expectations from education, perspective on education and life, and financial situation) for choosing private schools. However, the most important factor that all the interviewed families share in common is the success and quality of the school and their desire to provide a good education for their children. Therefore, it can be said that private schools are seen by middle-class families as institutions that they think will "provide a good education" for their children.

All of the families whose children study in private high schools stated that "they chose qualified private schools with high academic success due to their desire to provide a good education for their children" as the most important reason for choosing a private school. In this context, it can be said that the education strategy of the middle class has begun to shift towards private schools. Jülide, expresses the impact of academic success and the quality of the school in choosing a private school

for her child as follows: “The educational conditions are in the highest segment, teaching the child one-on-one... Their goals, their back ground from the past period. Our goal here is university. What was important in our choice was what the school could give my child.” Among other opinions, the following statements stand out: “Of course, the qualities of the school and the success stories of the school were effective. While I was looking for schools at that time, I looked a lot at the success stories of schools. ... The reason I chose (this school) was because of the high success rate of the school.” (Funda).

Choosing a Private School as an Investment in Education

One of the prominent findings of the research is that education is seen as an investment in the future by the families interviewed within the scope of the research. Parents think that education is an important tool for their children to access the universities and professions they target and to build a better future. Hande, who offers her child the opportunity to study at a private high school, expresses that she invests in the education of her children instead of financial investment:

I do not invest in a house or a car for my child's future, but I send him to a private school so that he can have a good education. Don't give your child anything but a good education. Let him gain his own self-confidence, gain his own profession, and stand on his own two feet. That's why I attach value to my children's education.

The Effect of Deficiencies in Public Education on Private School Choice

According to the research findings, among the important factors determining the research participants' choice of private schools is that they think that the education provided in public high schools is not sufficient. In parallel with the desire to provide success-oriented, qualified education, which was previously stated in the research findings, some students and families stated that they chose private high schools because they thought that they could not meet such educational expectations in public high schools. This situation is reflected in the families' statements as follows: Hande: I think like this. I wish a good education was provided at a good level in public schools. ... So, since public schools are empty and do not provide adequate education, I have to send my child to a private school. Another statement among the participants' statements was as follows:

In my district, there are two very qualified public schools. ... But I did not choose one of these two schools because I thought that no matter what, my daughter would not be given the opportunities of a private school in public schools. What kind of opportunities: sports opportunities, art opportunities, lack of options such as scientist training programs such as IB when he entered high school... Therefore, the public school would not be able to provide these opportunities. That's why I never thought (Eylül).

Students studying in private high schools expressed their thoughts on this issue as follows: “To be honest, there are so many deficiencies in public schools these days. Good education is not provided; A little sloppy” (Zeynep).

Of course, the fact that public schools were more crowded had some impact. For example, in our school, I can see that they care about each student one by one, but we also know that this does not happen in public schools. Because I've been there before. That's why we actually chose a private school (Nil).

Based on the opinions of the participants, thoughts about the deficiencies in public education are directly related to the content or quality of the education provided, but also include limited opportunities and inadequate physical conditions such as crowded classrooms.

Reproduction of Social Stratification Through School Choice

Research findings show that parents with similar socio-cultural positions tend to ensure that their children study in the same schools, which has an impact on school choice. It is seen that families who choose private high schools for their children's education evaluate the culture of public schools as "negative" and have a tendency to provide education for their children in schools close to their sociocultural position. One of the participants, Kıvanç, stated that “his daughter's desire to be with the children of families from similar socio-cultural groups was an important factor in choosing a private school.” Kıvanç, who is closer to the upper class position, finds it disturbing and problematic that there are students from other class positions at the school, even if they are in the minority. Hande, who is closer to the middle-class position, chose a private school where the majority of students were in a similar class position to her own.

Choosing a school is important from a social perspective and then from an environmental perspective. Of course, the environment is also important. Because popular schools (she names two private schools) are like that, empty inside, their students are just kids trying to do something with their money. There is no such thing in this school; mostly the children of civil servants attend. At least they all have an ideal. It's all about education. That's why this school was better for me. In other words, in terms of education and the environment.

It is understood that Hande does not choose the schools that children of families with very high income levels attend and think are popular. Instead, she chose a school that he thought was closer to her class position. In parallel with this situation, the majority of students studying in public high schools stated that they did not want to study in private schools and that one of the reasons for this was that they did not feel like they belonged there. Ayşe, one of the students, expresses this situation quite clearly and strikingly:

I wouldn't want to study at a private school. Because my family might not be able to afford it and I wouldn't feel like I belonged there, I personally think so. ... These are always arrogant people, cool people, smart-alecks, etc. That's why I didn't want to go.

As Ayşe stated, not feeling like you belong in a private school can be seen as a situation closely related to class belonging. Similarly, the feelings of Filiz, whose child is studying in a public high school and who is economically closer to the lower class position, about private schools are also a striking example of class belonging:

I don't like private institutions very much. I could never love, but it's better with the people, the nation, and the state. ... They are a little bit in that direction, cocky and cool like that. I get more angry when things like that happen. I love humble, smiling people. So public schools seem more friendly and closer.

Discussion

Research findings show that different factors have an impact on the school choice processes of students studying in private and public high schools. Central exam scores and the distance of the school from home play a decisive role in the school choice of students studying in public high

schools. Among the research findings of Kalsen and Yiğit Öztekin (2020), one of the most frequently put forward opinions is that if the students are not placed in a secondary education institution called a qualified school through central placement during the high school transition system, the majority of students have to register at the nearest secondary education institution based on their address.

The research findings highlight that families whose children's exam scores are not sufficient to enter a qualified high school and whose financial situation is sufficient choose a private school if they do not want to send their children to an unqualified public high school. Therefore, it can be said that school choice is a mandatory process for students studying in public high schools during the transition to secondary education.

It can be said that the distance of the school from home has a close relationship with the students' class positions when choosing a school. Some research results support this finding. The research findings of Kuzu et al., (2019) and Kalsen and Yiğit Öztekin (2020) show that having to enroll in the nearest school based on address according to central exam results may lead to class segregation. It can be said that the qualitative differentiation of schools depending on the region they are located in will lead to educational inequalities among students depending on their class position as a result of school choice. In addition, research findings show that choosing a school close to the homes of families whose children are studying in public high schools is one of the factors that prevent female students and low-income families from studying in "qualified" schools far from their homes. Demir and Yılmaz's (2019) research results reveal that the research participants view the address-based registration system negatively because the students, even if they are successful, will have to go to a school close to their homes and will be educated in the same classes as students whose success level is relatively low.

Research findings highlight that the academic success and quality of the school are effective in choosing a private high school. This finding is similar to the result of the research conducted by Hesapçioğlu and Nohutçu (1999). In the aforementioned research, it is seen that families attach importance to school features that will ensure or increase their children's success. It is possible to argue that the fact that families focus on success in school choices and choose private schools with

the desire to provide a good education for their children is an indication that the education strategies of middle-class families are turning to private schools.

Other factors in choosing a private school include the fact that education is seen as an investment and that private schools are thought to be better in this context, and the deficiencies related to public education. In parallel with these research findings, Owens et al. (2016) argue, based on the results of their research, that families see education as a good investment and that their investment in education has increased especially over the past 10-15 years.

Finally, research findings also show that families with similar socio-cultural and economic positions tend to ensure that their children study in the same schools, which has a significant impact on the choice of private schools. Therefore, it can be said that social stratification has an impact on school choice. Bernal (2005) also reveals in his research that most middle-class children are distributed between private and qualified public schools, and the children of the working class and the poor go to the rest of the public schools.

Conclusion

During the school choice process, different factors are effective in choosing private and public high schools. Choosing a private school is becoming one of the most important tools used by middle-class families to guarantee the educational success of their children. In choosing a public school, the exam score and the distance of the school from home were the most determining factors, and therefore a compulsory choice was made.

The exam-based school transition system, the separation of public high schools according to different qualifications, and the current deficiencies in public high schools lead to an increasing effect on the choice of private schools. While quality differences between public high schools lead to educational segregation due to students' inability to access equal educational opportunities; Along with the process of privatization of education, the inclusion of private high schools in school choice makes this segregation even more evident. Private schooling reproduces educational inequalities that arise depending on class position. The social stratification that arises due to the differentiation of cultural and economic capital between class positions is reproduced through the

increasing use of private schooling in school choice. *In this context, schools increasingly consist of homogeneous groups, and especially public schools are starting to become schools chosen by poor students.*

Recommendations

Based on the idea that education is a right, removing the qualitative differences between schools so that school choice can be made under equal conditions and making the necessary arrangements for every student to have equal access to a public and qualified education can be seen as one of the most important recommendations of this research.

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