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School Choice of Middle-Class Parents and Students in the Context of Neoliberal Policies ⁱ

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to examine the reasons of school choices of middle-class families and their children within the context of the neoliberal education policies in Turkish education system. The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research approach. The data were collected via semi-structured interviews. The first study group consisted of 22 parents (13 public and 9 private schools). The second study group consisted of 30 students (16 public and 14 private school students) who were middle class, had high enough exit-exam score to be able to choose science high schools in Gaziantep province in the academic year of 2016-2017. The data were analyzed using the descriptive and content analysis techniques. The findings indicated that academic, economic, environmental, personal, social and cultural, religious, politic factors and physical conditions affected middle class parents and students school choices. The multi-factorial features demonstrate that middle-school parents and students are rather cautious and thorough in school selection. An important inference from the findings is that middle-class tends to see education as a re-generational tool serving to hold on to their social status and existence.

Keywords: school choice, neoliberal policies, parents, middle-class

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Introduction

Education outputs far from the desired results, increased costs and insufficient state intervention in the education system to mobilize entrepreneurs are all among the cited reasons to privatize education (Adnett, 2004). According to Friedman (1997), since students and families will have the opportunity to choose the schools themselves if education is privatized, the “principle of competition,” one of the fundamental bases of neoliberalism, will come into play in the market and the desired success will be achieved in education.

Paulo Freire (1970), one of the leading names of critical pedagogy, has pointed out that students will be in the position of a consumer as a result of the privatization of education and their only objective would become a diploma with a potential of employment. Those who position themselves against privatization argue that commercialization of education brings about transfer of teacher authorities to the business world and hence the business world would become the winning party at the expense of creating disqualified teachers (see for example Apple, 1982; Molnar, 2006; Giroux, 2008).

Robertson and Dale (2013, pp.427) approach to the privatization from a different perspective and argue that privatization of education defines new terms and means in relation to the individuals, education and society. According to them, privatization of education transforms information into “diploma,” learning into “consumption” and learners into “human capital.” This can be considered as a new form of governmentality, which refers to a (renewed) relationship between those who govern and the ones who are governed (Lauder et al., 2006). According to Foucault (1997, pp.81), management is the guidance of individuals’ behaviors. He defines the use of power as a technique for shaping the actions of individuals (Foucault, 1982, pp.75-77). Therefore, the “force” that the power will use is a regulatory or transformative one. In his studies where he analyzed the concept of “power”, Foucault emphasizes the phrase “make someone willing” rather than “pressure” (Neumann and Sending, 2010). As a result, the state becomes governmentalized without the society being nationalized (Foucault, 1977, pp.286-287). The government tries to manage the desires and needs of individuals instead of managing them. People who are regenerated and reshaped become subjects of the government (Foucault, 1982, p.57-63) and freedom is managed (Foucault, 2010, pp.63).

Education is one of these areas of “freedom.” According to Ball (2003b, pp.166) and Reay et al. (2013), neoliberal policies in the field of education create an environment of constant race and competition and the “middle class” is the most affected strata. Ball (2003) points out that marketization in education forces middle-class families to secure the advantages of their class position for their children and that they find themselves in a class struggle and hence become workers of the “invisible hand.” Middle-class is aware that education is a means for their existence and regeneration.

Therefore, middle-class attaches importance to selecting the best alternatives for their children's education which is again subject of neoliberal policies.

The notion of class has long been examined from the Marxian and Weberian perspectives on the basis of economic capital, a transformation began in the analysis of class by the 1970s. For example, Bourdieu's views of class include the concepts of habitus, field and cultural capital. Cultural capital is the sum of knowledge gained through education (Bourdieu, 1986). Jaeger (2011) states that cultural capital accounts for differences between/among individuals. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is effective in determining the societal positions of individuals and that this type of capital has an impact on maintaining societal positions of classes by allowing them to regenerate themselves. Families attempt to maintain their class existence by transferring their cultural background to new generations. Hence, cultural capital, which Bourdieu defines as "knowledge capital", has great significance in the continuity of class position (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2003, pp.108).

Several studies showing how middle-class regenerates themselves through education (Ball, 2003; Brantlinger, 2003; Power et al., 2003; Devine, 2004; Balkan and Oncu, 2013; Aratemur Cimen 2015; Rutz and Balkan, 2016) also indicate that education has great significance for this class's maintenance of its existence. In this context, middle-class is a relatively advantageous group in the area of education compared to other classes, simply because this class is well-educated. As a result, they have sufficient knowledge and skills to control the complex systematic structure of education (Apple, 2001; Eryaman, 2009).

Official introduction of neoliberal understanding into the field of education was realized by the alignment programs prepared under the collaboration of the IMF and the World Bank in the 1980s (Sayilan, 2006). As of the 1980s, governments began to restructure education systems and practices with the influence of global neoliberalism in order to adapt to the new world order. International actors such as the European Union (EU), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), General Agreement on Tariffs and Services (GATS) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) played a role in this restructuring. In Turkey, privatization of education became official on an international level with the signing of GATS in 1998. Educational grants that have been paid to private school students since 2014 by the Turkish government have raised the interest in private schools (Education Reform Initiative, 2016, pp.11) and paved the way for families to make their school choices more carefully and diligently.

Secondary education in Turkey as an area of competition for the middle class

Turkey stands out as one of the countries where the level of success among schools in secondary education differs quite significantly (OECD, 2010). The main reason of this variation is the placement of students in secondary education institutions through nationwide exit-exams. Students who receive high scores in the exit-exams prefer science high schools, private science high schools and high schools specializing in social studies and hence these high schools turn out to be the most successful ones (Assesment, Selection and Placement Center, 2017). The study program implemented in “Anatolian Imam Hatip (Imam and Preacher) High Schools Practicing a Science and Social Studies Project or Programme and in “Project Schools” which have been serving under the General Directorate of Religious Education since 2016, is one of the most preferred programs due to features such as the ability of school managers to select the teachers of these programs and the single-sex education programs (i.e. separate education for boys and girls).

Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to examine the factors that affect the school choices of middle-class families and their children in the context of neoliberal policies in the Turkish education system. The study examines the reasons underlying the decisions and actions of families and their children in a period of neoliberal education policies.

Method

Selection of the study group

This research is designed as a phenomenological study, which focuses on high-school students and their parents. The main reasons to focus on high-school level are (1) that students’ and families’ are able to choose the high-school without restriction of hinterland (area of enrollment) in Turkey at the high school level; (2) that success levels of students are assessed with a nationwide exit-exam (held for the transition to secondary education); and (3) that the choice of high school is seen as critical for students and parents due to the concern that it will affect the level of success in the university entry-exams. While selecting the schools, public science high schools with the highest entry scores in the exam for transition to secondary education and private science high schools that accept students with equivalent scores are preferred.

Data have been collected through semi-structured interviews with middle-class families and their children. To identify the study group, literature related to the middle-class has primarily been reviewed. The studies such as Gilbert and Kahl (1993) and Power et al. (2003) suggest three main criteria for differentiation of middle-class: education, occupation and income level. In selecting the

study group, these three criteria were used. Regarding education level, participating families were expected to be graduates of at least high-school or college (associate's degree). With regard to income level, it was decided that a monthly household income of approximately \$1100 and above would be required as a result of the analysis of the data of the Research on Turkish Family Structure (TAYA, 2011) and the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK, 2014) taking into account the hunger and poverty thresholds in Turkey. Due to the above-mentioned reasons, the criterion sampling method of the purposeful sampling methods was chosen for the identification of the study group. In the identification of parents, the criteria of (1) level of education (at least high school graduate), (2) occupation, and (3) monthly household income (minimum \$1100) were used. While selecting students, in addition to those criteria, exit-exam score was also considered.

Participants

30 students and 22 parents from 9 different high schools (4 public and 5 private schools) participated in the study. All parents of students enrolled in private schools and 84% of parents of students enrolled in public schools stated that school choice was a joint decision taken by them and their children. Therefore, reasons behind the preferences of parents and students were examined. 13 of the parents were selected from public schools while 9 were selected from private schools and 16 of the students were selected from public schools while 14 were selected from private schools. 19 of the parents are females, while 3 of them are males. 20 of the students are females, while 10 of them are males. Ages of the parents range from 34 to 53, while the ages of the students range from 14 to 16. 4 of the parents are high school graduates, 13 are university graduates and 5 have postgraduate degrees. Parents who are interviewed have the following occupations: teacher (9), housewife (5), public official (2), engineer (2), military officer (1), doctor (1), pharmacist (1) and financial advisor (1). All of the interviewed parents are married. 13 of the parents can speak English and 4 Arabic as a second language. 5 of them do not know any foreign languages. Rather than using the names of the participants, the students, parents, public schools and private schools are referred to as "S", "P", "PBS" and "PRS" respectively and then they are numbered. For example, S-PRS1 refers to the first student enrolled in a private school.

Data collection

In the research, data have been collected through semi-structured interviews. Two separate interview forms were prepared for students and parents. Questions in relation to demographic variables as well as questions that would reveal the reasons for the school preferences were included in the interview forms. The parents were chosen from among the volunteers meeting the pre-determined criteria with the help of school administrations and the students who were interviewed before. It was observed that especially, almost all of the parents of students enrolled in private schools meet the

criteria for middle-class mentioned earlier. Hence, parents with higher education levels, occupational position and monthly incomes as well as knowledge of second language have been prioritized in the selection.

Data analysis

In this research, the content analysis techniques were used. The data were analyzed in four stages: (1) data were coded, (2) categories were identified, (3) codes and themes were arranged, (4) findings were identified and interpreted. Following the interviews, it was seen that parent and student preferences can be aggregated into 8 categories: academic, physical, economic, environmental, personal, social and cultural, religious and political. The categories and codes that were created to provide reliance were presented for expert analysis. Coder reliability rate was calculated on the basis of Miles and Huberman (1994) and the result was 0.91, which was high enough.

Findings

Findings with regard to parents' school choice

Findings obtained from the interview data regarding the factors affecting middle-class parents' school choices are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Factors affecting middle-class parents' school choice

Categories	Codes	Public school parents (N=13)		Private School Parents (N=9)	
		f	%	f	%
Academic Factors	Exit-exam score ranking of the school in the province	13	100	6	67
	Success level of graduates in the university exam	9	69	8	89
	Qualification of academic staff	7	54	9	100
	Strict regulations	2	15	1	11
	Monitoring students' work	1	8	7	78
	Being a project school	7	54	0	0
	Quality of foreign language teaching	0	0	8	89
	Counseling services	0	0	8	89
	More weekly class-hours	0	0	5	56
Physical factors	School security	7	54	6	67
	Richness of the resources and equipment	1	8	6	67
	Closeness to home	3	23	1	11
	Cleanliness and hygiene	1	8	2	22
	The school location (in a good district)	2	15	1	11
	Availability of a dorm within the school premises	2	15	0	0
	Small number of students in a class	0	0	8	89
Economic Factors	Similar economic milieu	12	92	7	78
	Scholarship opportunity	0	0	9	100
	Affordable school fee	0	0	5	56

Environmental Factors	Features of the circle of friends	8	62	7	78
	Reputation of the school	3	23	2	22
	Others' recommendation	2	15	4	44
Personal Factors	Willingness to go to a private school	0	0	5	56
	Willingness to receive a privileged education	0	0	3	33
Social and cultural factors	Social and cultural similarity of the families	10	77	4	44
	Guidance for social and cultural activities	0	0	8	89
	Effective educational counseling	0	0	8	89
Religious factors	Imam-Hatip (Preacher) high school	5	38	0	0
	Single-sex education	4	31	0	0
	Compatibility of the religious views with those of the school	0	0	2	22
Political Factors	Closure of certain private schools	9	69	0	0
	Governmental support to the school type	5	38	0	0
	Association of school administration with the government	0	0	1	11

As seen in Table 1, academic, physical, economic, environmental, personal, social and cultural, religious and political factors affect the school choice of middle-class parents. When academic factors are examined, exit-exam score ranking of the school stands out as the most referred feature while making a decision on school. The PRS parents consider qualification of academic staff as the most important feature. P-PRS9 stated as follows:

The quality of teachers is very important to me; these people will be role models for my child. That's why I sent my daughter to a private school, so that she can have selected teachers. And if we're not satisfied with the teacher, it's easy to change him/her next year, a complaint will do it

This parent saw the fact that the academic staff in the private schools can be changed in response to requests and complaints as an advantage. 54% of the PBS parents cited the selection of teachers through a central exam (the exam that teachers in Turkey take in order to work at public schools) as a superiority and included it in their reasons of preference. P-PBS2 explained her thoughts on the teachers' lack of qualifications in private schools as follows:

We didn't want to send our kid to private school, because there are no successful teachers there. If the teacher was successful s/he would've passed the exam and gotten appointed; s/he wouldn't be wasting his/her time at a private school.

Parents from both types of schools indicated that they made the school choice after researching the academic staff of the school. Success level of the graduates in the university entrance exam, strict regulations, and monitoring students' work were included in the reasons of preference by both group of parents, though with different rates. The parents appeared to differ while making school

choice with regard to quality of foreign language education, weekly class hours, counseling services and project schools. PBS parents feel that project schools can be beneficial for them as they are a new practice of MoNE (Ministry of National Education). On this issue, P-PBS4 expressed that

...project schools have just opened. So we think that the ministry will attach a greater importance to the academic success of these schools.

While making a decision, parents considered the **physical factors** of the school as important such as security capacity, richness of the resources and equipment, closeness to home, cleanliness and hygiene and the school location in a good district. 15% of the PBS parents were concerned with dorm facilities, while all PRS parents referred to classroom size.

In terms of **economic factors**, both group of parents attach importance to similar economic milieu in their school preference; yet, PRS parents attach additional importance to the scholarship opportunities and affordable school fees. It is worth noting here that In addition, PBS parents put more emphasis on similar economic milieu than those of PRS parents. Parents mentioned about the problems that both they and their children could experience if the economic profile of parents in the school of their choice would not be similar. For instance, P-PBS13 stated:

We were careful to ensure that there wasn't a huge gap between the financial situation of the parents at school and our financial situation. We wouldn't be able to buy what they buy for their children and that would upset both the child and us. In fact, that's the reason why we enrolled the child in public school while s/he could go to a private school.

In terms of **environmental factors**, both group of parents attach importance to the features of the circle of classmates, reputation of the school as well as others' recommendation. Most of the parents appeared to be concerned with the circle of friends, though through from different perspectives. Some approach from academic perspectives and others from a moral view. P-PBS3 approached the case from an academic perspective:

The reason I chose a public school for my kid is the circle of friends. If I sent him to a private school, he would see the spoiled kids there and would ignore his lessons and duties. But that's not at all how a student at a public school is. They're driven, hardworking and all they think of are their lessons.

In terms of **personal factors**, receiving private and privileged education are the factors leading parents to the private schools. P-PRS5 indicated her willingness as follows:

Actually, when our kid went to a private school for elementary education we thought she should go to a private school again. So we always researched the private schools during the preference process, we didn't even look at public schools.

In terms of **social and cultural factors**, similarity of families regarding social and cultural features appeared to be a concern shared by the majority of the PBS parents. For instance, P-PRS2 stated:

I'm a cultured person. I attach importance to reading books, going to cinema and theater. I raised my kid in the same way. I'd like the other parents and their children at the school to be like that as well.

In a similar vein, P-PBS2 mentioned as follows:

We were careful in selecting a school where there were families whose cultures matched ours. Otherwise our kid would have a difficult time in that environment.

An interesting finding is that while PBS parents do not take into account the guidance of school for social and cultural activities, the majority of PRS parents (89%) attached importance to this feature in making a school preference.

In terms of **religious factors**, it is worth noting here that religious factors are more traceable in the decision of PBS parents than those of PRS parents. Especially those who preferred Imam-Hatip high school indicated that they made this decision since these schools blended religious and science education into a single program. For this regard, P-PBS1 explained his thoughts as follows:

I thought that the school being both a science and an Imam-Hatip high school was a great blessing for us. Because we wanted our daughter to receive a science education as well as a religious one.

Separate education for boys and girls is found to be another religious factor affecting the school choice of certain families. Some parents expressed that the availability of a separate education for boys and girls in some science high schools positively influenced their decision. P-PBS3 said that science high schools with separate education for boys and girls is a great necessity for families like themselves. On the other hand, some parents emphasized the importance of the compatibility of religious views with those of the school administration. On that matter, P-PRS8 made the following statement:

They didn't allow my daughter to get up on stage because of the length of her skirt during the secondary school graduation ceremony and I went mad. Even though we like the school

in terms of classes, we changed it this year and selected a school that's more appropriate for us.

In terms of *political factors*, it can be seen that the political incidents in the country affect the school choices of the parents. PBS parents emphasized that due to the closure of private high schools, they had concerns for diplomas received from private high schools as they could create problems in the future and attached importance to this issue in their choice of schools. P-PBS7 mentioned the adversities that they might experience if they preferred a private school with the following statement:

...while we were choosing a school we decided that we absolutely wouldn't select a private school. Because some schools were closed right during this period of preference. There's no way of knowing whether the private school we chose would be closed or not in the future. What good would a diploma from a closed school be then? It would cause trouble.

State support of the school type (38%) is also included in the reasons of preference of PBS parents. This issue has been brought up by the parents of Imam-Hatip Science High School students. Some parents mentioned that the government attached importance to these schools and that those who received an education in these schools might have privileges in the future. P-PBS5 of the parents provided an explanation as follows:

The state attaches great importance to imam hatip science high schools. That's why we placed this school at the top of our preferences.

One PRS parent drew attention to the importance of close association of school administration with the government. P-PRS3 has expressed her opinion on this issue as follows:

In our school preference, we looked at schools that don't have a problem with the government. The one we chose is close to the government.

Findings with regard to students' school choice

Findings obtained from the interview data regarding the factors affecting middle-class students' school choices are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Factors affecting middle-class students' school choice

Category	Codes	Public school students (N=16)		Private school students (N=14)	
		f	%	f	%
Academic Factors	Exit-exam score ranking of the school in the province	16	100	13	93
	Success level of graduates in the university exam	10	63	14	100
	Qualification of academic staff	8	50	13	93
	Being a project school	9	56	0	0
	Quality of foreign language teaching	0	0	12	86
	Monitoring students' work	0	0	10	71
	Counselling services	0	0	10	71
	Preparation for foreign universities	0	0	2	14
Physical factors	Richness of the resources and equipment	3	19	10	71
	Small number of students in a class	0	0	14	100
Economic Factors	Scholarship opportunity	0	0	14	100
	Affordable school fee	0	0	1	7
Environmental Factors	Features of the circle of friends	14	88	12	86
	Reputation of the school	10	63	11	79
	Others' recommendation	7	44	8	57
Personal Factors	Willingness to go to a private school	0	0	4	29
	Willingness to receive a privileged education	0	0	4	29
Social and Cultural Factors	Guidance for social and cultural activities	10	63	13	93
Religious Factors	Imam-Hatip high school	9	56	0	0
	Single-sex education	5	31	0	0
Political Factors	Closure of private schools	4	25	0	0

As seen in Table 2, the school choice of public and private school students is affected by academic, physical, economic, environmental, personal, social and cultural, religious and political factors. In terms of academic factors, there many features matching to the ones expressed with the parents. In a similar vein to the parents, some PBS students indicated that they chose a public school over a private one as they thought that teachers in private schools were not adequate. When the students are compared among themselves, it is seen that private school students differ from public school students in areas such as the quality of education in foreign languages (86%), monitoring the student work (71%) and preparation for studying abroad (14%). S-PRS8 of private school students emphasizes the importance of foreign language education for himself/herself with the following statement:

My dream is to study abroad for university. So, the capabilities of schools in foreign language education were very important in my choice of school.

Some PBS students (56%) mentioned that they intentionally chose their school, as it was a project school; particularly because project schools would be more successful than other science high schools academically due to their features. S-PBS15 explained such as:

Project schools have different practices compared to other science high schools. For instance, they pick the academic staff themselves. This has really impressed me. I think these schools are going to be more successful.

In terms of physical features, it is seen that while all private school students took into account small classroom size in school choice, public school students did not mention about this. Private school students seemed to associate the quality of the school with the classroom sizes. Both group of students expressed that the resources and equipment of the school were effective in their choice of school. Technological capabilities of the school, instructional equipment of the classrooms, the availability of separate classrooms for classes such as music and painting and the availability of advanced laboratories appear to have an effect on students choices. Some private school students stated that they changed their preference after seeing the laboratory of a certain school. S-PRS4, for instance, explained:

I had actually placed another school at the top of my list of preferences. But after I participated in the orientation program of the (private) school I completely changed my mind. I think the most important feature that a science high school must have is the richness of its laboratories.

In terms of economic factors, it is seen that while public school students had nothing to say about this aspect, private school students chose schools by using criteria such as the scholarship opportunities of the school and the school fee being affordable. S-PRS5 stated:

I've wanted to study at A college since the 7th grade. But my score wasn't enough for their full scholarship program. So I preferred another private school.

In terms of environmental factors, both group of students attach importance to the circle of friends, the school reputation and others' recommendation. The students have expressed concern that the circle of friends at the school must be academically and socially appropriate. S-PBS8, for example, highlighted the academic success of the students in public schools:

I think students in public schools are more successful since they care classes. So I picked a public school, I wanted the environment to help me become more driven.

On the other hand, private school students tend to approach the friendship as a matter of socialization. S-PRS3, for instance, put it as follows:

Students at private schools are more social. I wanted to go to a private school since I'm a social and fun-loving person.

With regards to **personal factors**, it can be seen that the willingness of private school students to go to a private school and receive a privileged education are effective in their choice of school. Some private school students stated that they would like to study at a private school during high school as well, since they studied at a private school during primary and/or secondary school.

In terms of **religious factors**, PRS students do not refer to these factors in explaining their school choice; however, PBS students seemed to have more concerns with such factors in their accounts. Religious factors were especially evident in the expression of those students attending in PBS implementing Imam-Hatip program. These students expressed that they were attracted to the fact that Imam-Hatip science schools provide religious studies along with science programs. S-PBS1 expressed that

I had actually preferred a normal science high school. Afterwards, when I heard of this type of school I immediately transferred to this one, because the fact that the school is both an imam hatip high school and a science high school attracted me more.

When the opinions of students with regard to the choice of school are examined in terms of political factors, only do public school students voice their opinions as in the case of religious factors. Closure of private schools is included as an effective factor in the school choice of public school students. S-PBS11 of the students expressed this issue as follows:

I'm afraid of private schools now. If they get closed my whole life could be affected by that diploma. I think the best option is a public school. Its diploma is applicable anytime, anywhere.

Discussion

According to the report published by the World Bank, the middle-class comprised 7.6% of the world population in 2000. In the report, it is stated that this ratio will reach 16.1% by 2030 (World Bank, 2007). In their research, Kapas and Liang (2009) state that while the ratio of the middle class to the whole population is 11% in 2008 in countries such as Turkey, China, India, Mexico, Brazil and Russia, it is expected that 40% of the total population in these countries will be composed of the middle-class by 2028. Despite such projections, Ohmae (2006) determines that the majority of the middle class (80%) shift towards lower levels (classes). This finding might provide evidence to

Marx's (1963, pp.218) argument that the middle class would not be able to resist the capitalist competition and disappear. Irrelevant of whether Marx would be proven right or wrong, the current situation signals that middle-class, a large population, is in a struggle for existence to preserve its present position.

According to Gorz (2011, pp.21), the principle of competition, which neoliberalism is based on, has permeated all areas of life. The neoliberal subject dedicated himself/herself to working and producing by acting with the awareness of the existence of competition in any field of life (Marazzi, 2010, pp.42-49). These subjects who become "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Dardot and Laval, 2012) are aware that the responsibility of all their decisions lie with themselves. Thus, neoliberalism forces these neoliberal subjects whom it completely individualizes and holds responsible for everything to develop strategies in every area of life including consumption habits, social life, business life, entertainment culture, education, the area they live in and even the school where their children study and requires them to always be successful in the competition within the market (Oren, 2015, pp.165). Therefore, it can be said that the middle-class tries to fulfill its responsibility in the area of education by behaving both as "successful strategists" and "capable selectors" (Power, 2001) as well as "risk auditors" (Crook, 1999). This is because the middle-class sees the choice of school as an instrument for regenerating itself and hence the school choice of the middle class consists of a chain of quite complicated factors (Cucchiara and Horvat, 2014) as also has become clear in this study. Findings of this study, as in other studies (Ball, 2003; Brantlinger, 2003; Power et al., 2003; Devine, 2004; Balkan and Oncu, 2013; Aratemur Cimen, 2015), verify that the middle-class is trying to regenerate itself with education. From this point of view, this study reveals, as the research of Benson et al. (2015) does, that the middle-class consists of people who take careful and meticulous decisions on and who are active selectors of education.

This study made it clear that middle-class parents and students choose schools according to the exam results of the school, its academic success and the quality of the education provided at the school. Similar findings regarding the middle-class families' school choice are also reported elsewhere (e.g. Dimaki, et al., 2005; Crozier, et al., 2008; Vincent et al., 2012; Aratemur Cimen, 2015). Rutz and Balkan (2016) associate the importance attached to the school's academic success by the middle-class with their belief that paving the way for a successful university education for their children depends on academically successful high-schools. There are studies providing evidence that middle-class students are academically more successful than the ones from other classes (Lareau, 1997; Power et al., 2003; Crompton, 2008) and such findings support the idea that middle-class pays close attention to the academic success.

This study showed that middle-class parents and students considered the quality of teaching staff in their school choices. Others also made similar observations (e.g., Goldring and

Phillips, 2008; Ajuwon and Bradshaw, 2009; Crozier et al., 2011). The research studies compiled evidence that quality of teachers was an important predictor of students' academic success (see, for example, Rivkin et al., 2005; Hattie 2009). Results of these studies prove middle-class parents right in their expectations of teaching staff. A seminal study conducted by Crozier et al. (2011), in which the school preferences of middle and working-class families are compared, reports that middle-class families attach more importance to the quality of teachers. When our findings along with the others' are taken together, it could be inferred that as the middle-class is well-educated, they make use of this advantageous position while communicating with the teaching staff and hence somehow attempt to control them, acting as covert auditors (see also Lareu, 1997; Crozier, 1998).

Findings of this study point out that environmental factors as features of friends, school's reputation and others' recommendation are important for both parents and students while making a school choice. Researchers, such as, Woods (1996), van Zanten (2003), Bernal (2005), Crozier et al. (2011) and Aratemur Cimen (2015) touch upon the role of the environmental factors in the school preferences. An interesting observation comes from Bernal (2005) who argues that middle-class sees reputable and prestigious schools as a means to get differentiated from the working-class. Hence, middle-class pays close attention to the friendship opportunities, reputation and others' recommendation as all these features in one way or another potentially exhibit their difference.

Another important finding of this study was that middle-class parents and students tended to prefer schools with students whose families were economically and culturally similar to theirs in their choice of school. Similar observations are also made by others as well (see, Reay and Ball, 1997; Bernal, 2005; Maloutas, 2007; Raveaud and van Zanten, 2007; Crozier et al., 2011; Aratemur Cimen, 2015; Benson et al. 2015; Stacey, 2016). The researchers stated that middle-class did not want to choose schools consisting mostly of students from lower classes. School location was also found to be effective in school choice of middle-class parents. Similar findings are also reported by others (see, McNally, 2002; van Zanten, 2003; Vincent and Ball, 2004; Bernal, 2005; Maloutas, 2007; Goldring and Phillips, 2008; Rasky and Ringrose, 2009; Garnett, 2010; Aratemur Cimen, 2015; Benson et al., 2015; Prichard and Swezey, 2016). By preferring schools with students whose families have economic, cultural and social qualities similar to theirs, middle-class families actually try to preserve their own economic, cultural and social qualities and try to ensure this by their children's education (Lareau, 1997; Brantlinger, 2003; Power et al., 2003; Devine, 2004). Also Bourdieu (2006) argued that middle-class people tried to preserve their continuity by transferring their economic, cultural and social capital to their children through education.

That middle-class parents attach importance to the socio-economic status of the families of other students can also be indirectly associated with Coleman et al. (1966), Jencks et al. (1972) and the Plowden Report (1966). These sources have made a common observation that the family's societal

class and its cultural, social and economic qualities have a significant role in the success of the student. When looked at from this perspective, the fact that the middle class prefers schools with students whose families are economically, socially and culturally similar to theirs could be assessed as an indicator of their desire for their children to study together with academically successful students.

Though not directly related to our findings, we feel it worthwhile to note here that there are studies which reveal that middle-class families find themselves in a dilemma where they are adversely affected by the cultural richness while considering schools with students from different ethnic backgrounds (Gibbons and Machin, 2003; Raveaud and van Zanten, 2007; Boyd, 2011; Benson et al., 2015). After the civil war in Syria, the number of Syrian students studying in Turkey has become an issue that concerns the educators and the families. In 2011, the number of Syrian students studying at temporary education centers in Turkey is 34,000. The Syrian students were allowed to receive education with Turkish students at public schools with the “Regulation of Education Services for Foreigners” that was published by MoNE in 2014. The number of students studying at public schools has reached 450,000 in 2016 (MEB-MoNE, 2016). Therefore, ethnic background may be a new criterion in the coming years for the school choice of the middle-class in Turkey.

Consistent with findings of many studies examining the effect of religious factors in the school preferences of the families (Chang-Ho and Boyatt, 2007; Cohen-Zada and Sander, 2008; Ajuwon and Bradshaw, 2009; Belinda et al., 2013; Prichard and Swezey, 2016; Rowe, 2017), this study has found that the religious identity of the school is important for parents. In Turkey, schools which practice science/social studies programs in addition to the program of an Imam-Hatip high school (Project school) have begun operating in 2016. In this context, opening of schools which practice the programs of both an imam hatip high school and a science high school and the fact that boys and girls study separately at these schools have been an identifier for some middle-class families who consider religious and academic factors together. This can be interpreted as the willingness of the middle-class to preserve its religious values by providing their children with a school environment where their religious values are put in practice. According to Ajuwon and Bradshaw (2009), parents try to support the education of their children in a way that would be consistent with their religious beliefs.

One of the primary political reasons which especially affect the school preferences of parents is the closure of 1,017 private schools and 15 Foundation Universities following the coup attempt that occurred in Turkey on July 15, 2016. These closures occurred right before the period of preference for high schools. Therefore, this caused the middle-class parents and students to consider political factors while making a school choice such as the governmental support to the school type and association of school administration with the government. When the relevant literature is reviewed, it is seen that there are several studies that mention the impact of politics, political parties, party sympathies and the ruling government on education (Iversen and Stephens 2008; Jakobi et al., 2010; Vis, 2012; Gift and

Wibbels 2014; Garritzmann and Seng, 2016). The middle-class can be considered as a class that is aware of the relationship between politics and education and has the ability to make strategic choices accordingly (Apple, 2001; Benson et al., 2015). The choice of school is also a political act for the middle-class (Reay et al., 2013; Cucchiara and Horvat, 2014).

We finish discussion with an observation that we made during the study. Throughout this study, we observed that mothers were more active in the determination of the school preferences (19 mothers - 3 fathers). The majority of the participants in many other studies (Billingham and Kimelberg, 2013; van Zanten, 2003; Aratemur Cimen, 2015) focusing on middle-class parents were also mothers as well. We believe that mother dominance in our and other studies is far from a simple coincidence; it is, we think, related to the (and in fact reflect) middle-class mothers' qualities. In many studies conducted on the middle-class and education (Reay, 1998, 2005; Ball 2003; Griffith and Smith 2005; Crozier et al., 2011; Gottzén, 2011; Irwin and Elley, 2012; Rowe and Windle, 2012; Stacey, 2016; Yamamoto, 2016; Leyton and Rojas, 2017), the interest of middle-class mothers in education due to their educational backgrounds and the fact that they are the party taking an active role in the decisions regarding the education of their children are mentioned. May (2012) attributes the fact that middle-class mothers are responsible for the decisions taken during their children's education process to the reduction of mother and child relationships to an entrepreneurial one. According to May, mothers see their children as an investment instrument and try to maximize their profits by obtaining a good university diploma at the end of the process.

Conclusions and educational implications

In the study, it has been concluded that the school preferences of parents and students are affected by academic, physical, economic, environmental, personal, social and cultural, religious and political factors. This multi-dimensionality showed how careful and meticulous the middle-class is in their school choices. In line with this conclusion, it can be said that the middle class uses education as an instrument to regenerate itself.

In the study, it has been concluded that middle-class parents attach importance to the fact that parents of other students are economically, socially and culturally similar to themselves. The desire of the middle-class for their children to study with students from a similar habitus, reveals that this is a class which tries to preserve its advantageous position with its economic, social and cultural capital.

It has been seen that the middle class also attaches importance to its religious values, especially in public school preferences. This can be said to arise from the fact that the middle class tries to continue its struggle for existence by preserving its humane, ethical, religious and universal values as well as its economic and cultural capital. In the study, it has been found that the middle-class

parents and students make their choice of school by assessing political factors as well. In the research, it has been discovered that the participants position themselves according to the political incidents in the country during the choice of a school and they acknowledge that all types of schools have either a religious or a political identity regardless of them being a private or public school.

Our final words are concerned with a brief consideration of educational implications of our findings. In the study, it has been seen that the personal preferences of students in particular, remain in the background during their choice of school. The pressure of academic success and “diploma” on the students may turn them into unhappy and ordinary individuals in the future. Preferences and priorities of young people must be considered independently of market conditions, even during the struggle for class position and existence and steps must be taken in this direction. Academic, physical and social insufficiencies of public science high schools in particular, make the middle-class become dependent on the private sector and lead them into a vicious-circle. In order to overcome this, the public schools must look for ways to rescue itself from the clutches of neoliberal policies.

This study has been conducted with middle-class parents and students. The school choice process can be examined by adding different dimensions including school administrators and teachers to studies. Also, the determining factors can be revealed by researching the university preferences of the middle-class and other classes in the context of neoliberal policies implemented at the higher education level.

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