

The Market Value of Knowledge and Academic Failure

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Abstract

As in many countries, neoliberal policies have affected the field of education in Turkey. The competitive school ranking system and its meritocratic narratives have shaped students' aspirations and their understanding the sources of success and failure. This study reveals the resonance of these policies on individuals. Through in-depth interviews with high-school students in Istanbul, this phenomenological qualitative study engaged with 29 students intensely. It is found that individuals aspired to reach top positions within the neoliberal system. Which corresponds to entering Anatolian High Schools in the Turkish education system. Often influenced by parents who helped to deliver the system's messages, students themselves ignore their abilities and strive for promising positions in the market. They viewed themselves as solely responsible for their academic failures. However, this article suggests that student failure results from an educational system that encourages all students to pursue the same goals while ignoring their unique talents and predispositions.

Keywords: Academic failure, School Choice, Neoliberal Policies, Academic Attainment, Phenomenology

About the Article

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Introduction

Is it possible to order knowledge sets hierarchically by their value? Political science professor W. Brown (2011) has expressed her concern that the humanities today are facing near extinction at public universities in the United States. The ever-expanding global dominance of the neoliberal market¹—which demands rational and measurable indicators—has gradually reduced the financial power and demand for academic fields that do not promise market-based return. In this context, education has been reduced to a tool that serves the goals of the individual with psychological approaches that put the student at the center and philosophical approaches that emphasize the subject. The individual has the ‘freedom’ and ‘obligation’ to choose the knowledge s/he will acquire, weighing its benefits to her/himself. As a result, the value of education is evaluated based on its income potential. This situation jeopardizes all theory-based scientific fields that form the basis of applied sciences.

Neoliberalism is not merely an economic model but a hegemonic ideology that reshapes the global order, restructuring various aspects of life, including the concept of education and education systems. As in many other countries, Turkey has also been significantly influenced by these ideological transformations. With the increasing dominance of neoliberal policies, education has been redefined through market-oriented principles that prioritize competition, individual responsibility, and measurable outcomes. This study reveals how neoliberal policies—particularly influential in Turkey’s education system since the 1980s—have shaped the ways in which students make sense of academic failure. By focusing on failure, the study examines how students in Turkey position themselves within this competitive framework and the types of knowledge they rely on to define success. In doing so, this research highlights the extent to which macro-level neoliberal policies resonate at the micro level, influencing students’ perceptions of the individual, success, and failure in Turkey.

Undoubtedly, all ideologies see education as a means to serve their ends. It is impossible to plan education without influence from ideologies (O’Neil, 1981) and all actors involved in education take part in political action, whether consciously or not (Apple, 2019). With the industrial era, the necessity of mass education was understood, and compulsory education was introduced for efficient production. Education is designed to serve the objectification of the individual within the state (Hegel, 1991, pp. 113–114) and the rationalization of political power (Weber, 1993, pp. 221–223). With the collapse of both the Soviet Union and the Keynesian economy in the 1980s, neoliberalism has become a widely adopted ideology worldwide. Thus, the transition process from an industrial society to an information society has begun. Therefore, developing tools that provide information, establishing creative connections between different information,

¹ The dictionary meaning of the word market is the square—a market place where buyers and sellers meet. This concept has been used in more abstract and inclusive meanings within discussions on neoliberal ideology. In this study, it is generally used in the sense of abstract authority in which the material equivalent of a product or service is determined on the social ground and supply-demand relations are determined.

entrepreneurship, lifelong learning and competitiveness has become more critical than acquiring the knowledge itself. The relationship between knowledge and education has gradually become instrumental (Güllüpinar, 2015).

The adoption of neoliberal ideology has also affected educational systems. Notably, neoliberal understandings built on the principles of the free market, the individual's freedom of choice, individual benefit, and competition (Harvey, 2005; Beaud, 2015) lead education to be evaluated as a product or sector like other fields, including health, agriculture, and media (Apple, 2000; Davies et al., 2006). Educational institutions have also turned into companies seeking profit (Connell, 2013). Education has become a commodity rather than a citizenship right through the increasing number of private education institutions or tuition fees. Neoliberal education policies have held the student (and sometimes the family) responsible for investing in themselves, claiming that the schooling system offers the right to free choice. The entrepreneurial individual, created by neoliberalism, has the freedom of choice and should therefore determine the profitable educational path for her/himself.

Neoliberalism sees education as a means of shaping human capital. The goal of education is to train manpower in skills and knowledge that the market needs (Connell, 2013). The skills and behavioral patterns an individual acquires during the education process should return to the market in the form of a productive workforce. The existing market order in the state will serve to meet the needs of individuals, and therefore the benefit arising from scientific advances and knowledge should serve the functioning of the market (Hayek, 1995, p.155). Thus, this understanding glorifies technological and application-based information that can revive production and be transformed into a product or service. Education has transformed from a system that deepens and expands intelligence and sensitivity and provides historical consciousness into a system intended to raise entrepreneurial individuals proficient in technical skills (Brown, 2011). Consequently, training programs and distribution of resources prioritize commercial concerns (Ball et al., 1994, p.19). As a result of ranking systems that categorizes schools according to their success, school administrators search for talented students. The emphasis shifted to the student's performance rather than the student's needs. In other words, what the school contributes to the student is not as important as what the student contributes to the school (Apple, 2001).

In the market order—where everything is transformed into a buyable product—those without the means to struggle are pushed out of the system and marked as failures. Social groups with appropriate behavioral codes in their habitat have been able to use them for their own benefit by re-coding and transformation mechanisms (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990). Thus, neoliberal policies continue to reproduce existing social divisions (Apple, 2001). With the influence of neoliberalism's discourse on individuality and free choice, the individual is declared solely responsible for his own decisions. The individual is obliged to look after her/his own interests within the market conditions (Olssen, 1996). In this case, academic failure is understood to be due to the individual not making suitable investments in her/himself. Considering the continuous re-evaluation of the

certificates obtained as a result of certificate inflation, the individual finds her/himself in a constantly intensifying race, just like the market competition (Brown, 2003).

Although the impact of neoliberal policies on education in Turkey has become more noticeable in recent years, traces of neoliberal influence emerged as early as the 1980s. In 1986, then-President Kenan Evren questioned the education services provided by the state to its citizens, asking, 'He has 12 children, 12 of whom are educated by the state free of charge. Is this social justice?' (quoted in Gök, 2004, p. 101). A guide published by the Ministry of National Education in 1999 (Bal et al., 1999) emphasized the need to raise individuals who can produce marketable products using advanced technology. In addition to abstract goals, the state undertook many practical steps that served neoliberal policy. The first of these was the privatization of education.

While private schools comprised only 7.71% of all schools in 2006–2007 (MoNE, 2007), that number increased to 19.02% for the years 2023–2024 (MoNE, 2024). In addition, the state announced a financial incentive package for families who sent their children to private schools, which varied according to the socioeconomic development level of the region and the school level (T.C. Official Journal 2014). Following curriculum reform in 2004, the new textbooks included individual-oriented rather than society-oriented narratives. These textbooks evaluated the individual as a producer, consumer, and entrepreneur (Akkaymak, 2010, p. 101; İnal, 2006, p. 281). In his article, İnal (2006) drew attention to the conflict between the new curriculum and the sentimental and moral values of the Turkish society, such as compassion and self-sacrifice. The individual competition is centralized within the education system. The scarcity of schools providing a strong education gradually sharpened this competition in this exam-based education system. While the ratio of government funding allocated for education has gradually decreased (ERG, 2021), the household budget allocated to education by families struggling for their children to be placed in good schools has increased. These practices prioritize the individual's economic capital in the education system, yet also encourage the belief that individuals are solely responsible for acquiring this capital. Therefore, a qualitative study that reveals students' perceptions of academic failure and how these perceptions are associated with different fields of knowledge will provide a critical contribution to the field and complement the existing literature. This study aimed to reveal the relationship between the neoliberal policies especially in the field of education and students' interpretation of academic failure and success.

In the following sections, a literature review will analyze the basic principles of neoliberalism, its development process, and its relationship with education. The article will then explore the relationship between the neoliberal individual and academic failure; this relationship will be understood in relation to educational inequality in the context of Bourdieu's theory of reproduction. After detailing the stages of qualitative research, the value that the market places on students' knowledge areas will be discussed in the context of academic success and failure. It will be focused on two main themes: 'the knowledge hierarchy message conveyed by the market' and 'academic failure of the individual through the education system'.

Neoliberalism and its impact on education

The economic crisis of the late 1970s led to widespread criticism of the Keynesian model's 'strong state, strong market' emphasis. In response, neoliberalism emerged with the 'strong free market, weak state' approach, becoming the dominant political and ideological structure of capitalism by the 1980s (Theodore et al., 2011). This shift promoted privatization, deregulation, tax cuts for capital owners, and the reduction of social welfare programs, arguing that economic growth depended on a self-regulating market and individual entrepreneurship (Uçkaç, 2019). Proponents of neoliberalism claim that competition drives societal progress (Friedman, 1951, as cited in Peck, 2010, pp. 3–4) and that private property should take precedence over the public interest. In this framework, the state's primary role is to maintain market mechanisms rather than intervene for social welfare (Turner, 2008). As Margaret Thatcher famously stated in 1987, "There is no such thing as society! There are male and female individuals," reinforcing the idea that individuals, not the state, are responsible for their own well-being. This ideology has profoundly reshaped public services through three forms of privatization (Brown, 2011). First, public services are outsourced to non-profit organizations but operate under profit-driven rather than public-interest motives. Second, public goods are replaced by individualized services, as seen in the rise of toll roads, paid higher education programs, and privatized public transport. Finally, responsibility for funding and accountability is transferred to the lowest units, leaving teachers, students, and office workers to safeguard their own interests without regard for collective welfare.

As in many areas of life, education has experienced the painful effects of the neoliberal worldview. In addition to privatizing educational institutions that care for social benefit, neoliberal policy has positioned schools as places for the production of actors to feed itself. Hayek (1995, p. 155) sees the money network as the mechanism that holds society together and argues that the benefits arising from scientific advances and knowledge reach humanity by feeding the market order. In this way, neoliberal education has recognized natural sciences, engineering sciences, and applied sciences under the umbrella of empirical knowledge as valid and valuable. In addition, the educational environment supports learning by doing and the entrepreneurship of the individual (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 334). In this case, a product or service produced through applied sciences can be a commodity that can be marketed and converted into money. In short, education is positioned as a tool that will pave the way for high-paying jobs (Hayek, 1978). The market values knowledge according to the degree to which it turns the wheels of production and consumption in the market.

Giving the knowledge clusters in the education program the right to exist as long as they feed the market - like decreasing the hours of the fundamental sciences and increasing the hours of applied sciences instead in the curriculum -has brought many intellectual, moral, and sociological problems. In his article 'The Separation of Knowledge from the Knower', Bernstein (2000, p.86) stated that after about 1,000 years, knowledge has separated from its humane and inward orientations. The neoliberal approach does not

aim to raise individuals with intellectual knowledge, as the link between knowledge and human self-discovery has been severed and wholly secularized. The production of new knowledge and scientific discoveries exists within the framework of commercial competition (Delanty, 2001, pp. 108–109). Knowledge becomes money itself, rather than being like money (Bernstein, 2000, p. 86). In this case, instead of pursuing spiritually nourishing knowledge, the individual turns toward fields that provide him/her with material gain. This market-driven educational system results in the individual lacking the freedom to choose the knowledge she/he wants to acquire. The individual must instead act according to the demand of the market. While neoliberalism emphasizes the freedom of the individual, it also creates the problem of freedom.

Neoliberalism also prioritizes commercial concerns within educational institutions and therefore necessitates that resources are allocated to meet these concerns (Ball et. al. 1994, p.19). National and even international ranking tables for universities were established as quality indicators of schools. Schools have, therefore, competed to recruit more successful and intelligent students to develop products to feed the market. This prioritization of high-achieving students has led to the withdrawal of resources from students with special needs or learning difficulties (Apple, 2001, p. 185). The image of schools as ‘safe, domesticated and progressive’ has transformed into ‘threatening, estranged and regressive’ (McCulloch 1997, p. 80). Students who can continuously invest in themselves can survive in such a system. This system benefits middle-class families in terms of their ability to figure out the system’s rules and their social, economic, and cultural capital (Apple, 2001; Ball et al., 1994).

Therefore, education in the context of neoliberal policies is far from a system with equal opportunity for everyone or where individuals can freely make choices, as claimed. Individuals with the power to access the necessary resources can use them in their own favor. In this case, it only deepens the existing educational inequality in society.

Educational inequality, neoliberal self and academic failure

Bourdieu (1977), who carried out important studies on educational inequality, argues that schools, as the transmitters of a certain culture, are essential in ensuring social reproduction by excluding children who are not members of the dominant culture. The ‘habitus’ that forms the basis of Bourdieu’s theory is a system that includes all the ways of thought, action, and perception of a particular social group. Individuals have latently limited freedom in choosing the codes of behavior within this field. It is, therefore, unthinkable for the individual to act independently of the store of the social group in which he/she is located (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 91).

In Bourdieu's theory (1977), another concept that explains the mechanism of the wheel of reproduction is the concept of ‘capital’, which describes how cultural transmission occurs. Families strengthen their children’s educational lives through cultural transfer, purchasing services, and utilizing human resources. Bourdieu argues that capital

(economic, social, and cultural) is largely inherited from the family, and therefore education only legitimizes the values of a certain segment of society and ensures the reproduction of the existing social class structure (Bourdieu, 1977). Although the education system seems to function based on merit, it transforms existing social classifications into academic classifications, thus ensuring the existing structure's preservation (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). According to Bourdieu, the idea that the education system is an institution that develops students' abilities stands as a 'myth' (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 32).

In the neoliberal understanding, individuals are not only free but also responsible for their own actions and welfare (Harvey, 2005, p. 66). In the field of education, individuals are obliged to improve themselves and make the right choices in this direction. They must overcome the problems they encounter in this process with personal efforts. This perspective aligns with the concept of the neoliberal self, which is characterized as an agent who pursues autonomy, fulfillment, and meaning by making strategic choices aimed at self-improvement. As a rational competitor, the neoliberal self operates within an economic logic of productivity and efficiency, constantly seeking ways to optimize personal value (Vassallo, 2013). In this framework, the individual is expected to take full responsibility for his/her own life, where success or failure is seen as a direct consequence of personal choices and efforts (Davies et al., 2006). The neoliberal self is active, calculating, and continually seeking betterment, always assessing risks and opportunities to enhance their own capital. This ongoing process involves strategic control to reach the ultimate goal, shaping oneself into a more competitive and efficient subject in an ever-demanding market-driven society (Vassallo, 2013).

Neoliberalism emphasizes the concepts of freedom, equality, and justice while ignoring economic and social inequalities. However, the equality of the individual in a free-market economy disappears when the 'profit-loss system' does not favor the unfit structures (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 318). An individual born into an environment with a lack of the valid resources is destined to be pushed out of the picture. In this case, failure is dealt with as a purely individual situation, free from explanations related to class or poverty. Illness, addiction, unemployment, or other abnormal conditions once perceived as a blow of fate are now considered the fault and responsibility of the individual as a result of neoliberal self understanding (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 24). An individual life also requires taking responsibility for unfortunate and unexpected events.

In education, students are considered the architects of academic successes and largely responsible for academic failures. All students take the same courses in the classroom, pass the same exams, and are ranked accordingly. The only person with power over this situation is the student. Meyer and Rowan (1977) mention that many programs, policies, and practices expose students to this individualistic perspective. The most important practice is the constant assessment and grading of students. Exams are both central to the functioning of the school and emphasize the individuality of student achievement (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes et al., 1977; Meyer et al., 1983). These practices lead students to evaluate success and failure as an individual phenomenon. Even students

who experience failure see themselves as the sole cause of failure (Farrington, 2008; Meyer et al., 1983). According to Mehan et al. (1986), a student's career options do not consist of a simple equation of potential and effort. Rather, these options result from the continuous interaction between the child's existing or developing capacities, the ongoing socialization processes at school, and the way the child transforms cultural capital into behavior.

This study reveals how neoliberal policies—influential in Turkey's education field since the 1980s—have affected the process of making sense of academic failure. Through its focus on failure, the study illuminates how students in Turkey evaluate themselves in this competitive system and through which set of knowledge they define success. In so doing, this study provides indicators of how neoliberal policies implemented at the macro level resonate at the micro level, affecting students' perceptions of the individual and success/failure in Turkey.

Method

In the following section, details regarding the research methodology will be presented. The section will outline the research design, describe the participants, and explain the data collection process. It will also address reliability and validity considerations, along with the researcher's role in conducting the study.

1. Research Methodology

In this study, phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs, was employed within the framework of the interpretive paradigm, as the research focuses on students' experiences of academic failure and seeks to explore how they make sense of this phenomenon. Phenomenology is a systematic approach aimed at uncovering and explaining the essential meaning of lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

2. Participants of the Study

This research was conducted using maximum variation sampling in Istanbul. As Turkey's most populous city, Istanbul reflects Turkey's socio-cultural mosaic. Two districts—one with the highest quality of life index (HLQR) and another with the lowest quality of life index (LLQR)—were selected based on the study conducted by Şeker (2011) in which the researcher grouped the regions of Istanbul with reference to physical, social, economic, infrastructural indicators. A total of seven² schools were selected from different types of secondary education institutions in these districts: one vocational high school, one

²² In one of the districts, Imam Hatip high school is mixed gender, while in the other, it is divided into two separate schools for boys and girls.

Anatolian high school, and one religion-based Imam Hatip high school.³ Since high school students experience their first central placement exam⁴ and are subjected to a national ranking system, it was predicted that they would be more likely to experience academic failure than those in Middle School. Schools were selected to ensure that the central placement exam scores were parallel across districts. After confirming the diversity of districts and schools, all 10th-grade students in the selected schools were asked to write a story of failure in their academic life and to fill out a form with their demographic information and 9th-grade GPA scores to ensure diversity in student achievement and socio-demographic status. Forms from a total of 1,085 students were collected, of which 1,048 were analyzed, including 494 males and 554 females. Students were selected for interviews based on whether they held above or below-average GPA scores in their schools. Thus, a total of 29 students were interviewed, 15 of whom were from HLQR and 14 of whom were from LLQR. Fourteen students were female and 15 were male; 12 studied in Imam Hatip high schools, 9 in Anatolian high schools, and 8 in vocational high schools. Fourteen students maintained above-average GPA scores, while 15 held below-average GPA scores.

To make the demographic characteristics of the participants easily identifiable, 'L-AS-S(+)F2' was used to code participant information. The first digit of this code represents the district. The letter 'L' represents a low life quality index while 'H' represents a high life quality indexed region. The second digit represents the type of school. The abbreviation 'AS' stands for Anatolian high school, 'VS' for vocational high school, and 'RS' for Imam Hatip high school (religious schools). The next digit represents achievement status. The symbols 'S(-)' were used for participants with below-average GPAs in their schools and 'S(+)' for those with above-average GPAs. The last digit represents gender. The abbreviation 'F' was used for female students and 'M' for male students. Table 1 below schematically presents the coding system.

³ There are many types of schools in the Turkish education system's structure of secondary education institutions. Science Anatolian high schools and Anatolian high schools were established to prepare students for university education. Vocational schools include vocational courses and apprenticeships, which means there is less mathematics and science in the curriculum compared to Anatolian high schools. Imam Hatip schools offer many religious courses, like kalam, Qur'an, fiqh, hadith.

⁴ In the Turkish education system, during the transition from primary to secondary education, a centralized exam consisting of questions related to the primary education curriculum is held simultaneously throughout the country. In the years this research was conducted, this exam was compulsory for all students and students made their choices according to the score they received regardless of the type of school.

Table 1 Participants Codes

Code Element	Symbol	Description
District	L	Low life quality index region
	H	High life quality index region
School Type	AS	Anatolian High School
	VS	Vocational High School
	RS	Imam Hatip High School (Religious School)
Academic Performance	S(-)	Below-average GPA in school
	S(+)	Above-average GPA in school
Gender	F	Female Student
	M	Male Student
Number	If multiple students share the same demographic characteristics, numbers such as '1', '2' have been used to differentiate them.	

3. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating students. In the semi-structured interview form, questions were designed to explore different aspects of the participants' experiences. These included opinion- and value-based questions such as "How do you define failure?", emotion-related questions such as "How did you feel after experiencing failure?", past-related questions such as "What has happened in your educational journey so far?", and experience- and behavior-related questions such as "Have you ever experienced failure in your education?". The interview questions were reviewed and revised based on the feedback of two field experts. Before finalizing the form, pilot interviews were conducted with two 10th-grade students. Based on these interviews, revisions were made to clarify misunderstood questions, and the final version of the interview form was developed.

Data were collected after obtaining ethical approval from the university and official permissions from the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of National Education and the Governorship of Istanbul. With the approval and guidance of the school principal, the researcher was supported by either guidance counselors, school officers, or vice-principals. The opinions of the school staff who assisted the researcher in selecting the students for one-on-one interviews were also considered. In cases where the students predetermined by the researcher did not want to participate, substitute selections were made. The total duration of the interviews was approximately 950 minutes. The data were transcribed, resulting in a total of 422 pages of text. After the transcription process, participant verification was obtained from the students who could be reached via email.

4. Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, the researcher applied thematic analysis based on Van Manen's (1990) 6-step data analysis. In this approach, the text is listened to and read multiple times, allowing for the selection of key expressions that are thought to reveal the phenomenon or experience (Van Manen, 1990). These expressions are then grouped and categorized. Once the themes emerge, they are interpreted in conjunction with the existing literature. Since the research was designed with a qualitative approach, the data is not intended to be generalizable. From an interpretive perspective, the focus was on how students made sense of their situations.

5. Reliability and Validity

To ensure validity and reliability of the research, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) approach was adopted, which redefined traditional notions of validity and reliability to align with the nature of qualitative research. Instead of using positivist terms, they introduced alternative concepts that better reflect the interpretive paradigm. They replaced internal validity with credibility, emphasizing that findings should be accurate and trustworthy from the perspective of participants. External validity was reconceptualized as transferability, suggesting that qualitative research should provide detailed contextual descriptions to allow applicability in similar settings. Internal reliability was substituted with dependability, which requires consistency in data collection and analysis despite the evolving nature of qualitative inquiry. Lastly, external reliability was reformulated as confirmability, ensuring that findings are derived from the data rather than the researcher's biases or subjective interpretations. These constructs provide a framework for evaluating qualitative research rigor while respecting its contextual and interpretive nature.

To enhance credibility, this study employed prolonged engagement, triangulation, expert review, and participant verification. The researcher maintained long-term interactions with participants to minimize biases and better understand their experiences. Data triangulation was achieved through multiple data sources, including document analysis, interviews, and observations, to ensure a well-rounded understanding of the phenomenon. Expert feedback was obtained from professors and field specialists

throughout the research process, refining the methodology and data interpretation. Additionally, participant verification was conducted by sharing transcribed interviews with students to confirm accuracy. To ensure transferability, the study utilized thick descriptions of the research setting, participant demographics, and data collection process. A maximum variation sampling strategy was employed to include a diverse range of participants, providing insights applicable to similar educational contexts. For dependability, the researcher followed standardized procedures during data collection, such as applying the same protocols when distributing demographic forms and conducting interviews. Expert opinions were also sought to validate coding and thematic analysis, ensuring consistency. To establish confirmability, a peer debriefing process was conducted with field experts to review data interpretations. Additionally, an audit trail was maintained, documenting all research decisions, reflections, and methodological choices, allowing transparency in how conclusions were reached.

6. The Role of the Researcher

Coming from a relatively wealthy family, I grew up in an environment where education and achievement were highly valued. My early understanding of success was deeply rooted in hard work and personal effort, believing that academic excellence alone could open all doors. However, over time, this perspective shifted. While pursuing my doctorate, I began questioning the broader social and structural factors influencing academic performance. My growing interest in how students perceive academic failure led me to choose this as my research topic. I recognized that academic failure is not solely an individual shortcoming but a complex phenomenon shaped by both societal and personal conditions. Despite my own experiences, I remained aware that others may interpret failure differently, which shaped my approach to interview questions and data analysis. I carefully designed my study to avoid imposing personal biases, ensuring that I allowed students to express their own unique perspectives on academic failure.

Findings

1. The market's knowledge hierarchy messaging

The market communicates its demands and needs to society through many channels. Students not only make sense of these messages themselves but are also exposed to more clearly articulated forms of the same message by their families. Under this theme, "You will be out in the cold" refers to the message conveyed by families, while "My abilities vs. my acceptances" and "Neither inside nor outside the circle" are sub-themes that reflect how students interpret this message.

1.1. 'You will be out in the cold'

The phrase 'be out in the cold' is the most common of these messages. This term is generally used in social life to suggest that others have filled all available positions and

there is no place left for the individual. This term is often used when students who did not achieve the exam scores required for enrollment in their preferred schools are not placed in a school or when they cannot find a job after graduation. The phrase emphasizes that the individual will not be able to find a job that will allow him/her to earn money. The individual who cannot find a 'useful' position for himself/herself is 'out in the cold'.

There exists a social consensus regarding what constitutes failure and success. Students learn that alternative routes to the socially accepted linear equation that leads to success are not even worth considering. Participant students stated that parents and close relatives subjected them to suggestions, warnings, and even angry reactions when choosing their high school department preferences. These reactions were relayed in more detail by students who wanted to take paths that differed from the mainstream. They stated that they faced objections from their families when they wanted to choose fields such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, or language. The most important reason underlying the objections of their families was economic concerns. As observed in Bourdieu and Passeron's (1964) study, families fear that their children will not be able to earn enough if they graduate from these departments.

In this regard, L-AS-S(-)F shared her concern that her father was not yet aware of the last-minute change in her department preference. Although she predicted that her father would not react harshly, she also stated that he warned her, 'If you study languages, you will be out in the cold'.

"Honestly, I haven't told my father yet that I chose the language track. Here's what happened: At first, my father and I came here together, and since my father knew that I was going to study law—because I had been saying it since I was a child—he assumed that was the plan. So, we initially chose the equal-weight track together. Later, I thought about it at home, reflected on it, and then I went to my school teacher and changed my department. I only told my mother; I haven't told my father yet. I don't know how he will react when I tell him, I hope he won't be angry. I don't think he will be, but I still hope he won't. I think my father will say, 'It's up to you, whichever you want, go for it,' but also, 'I wish you hadn't done this because if you study in the language track, you will be left out in the cold.' I mean, a lot of students from the science track, even engineers, are currently unemployed. For example, my cousin is a computer engineer, and he is jobless. And it's not even that he graduated from a bad school. He would say, 'So you chose the language track? What are you planning to do with it? At which company do you plan to work?' But for me, even translating books would be fine. I mean, at least, I think if I applied somewhere to translate a book, maybe they would hire me. I hope it works out." (L-AS-S(-)F)

The participant student justified her decision to her father by stating that 'even engineers and so on are currently out in the cold'. She also gave the example of her cousin, a computer engineer, who was unemployed despite graduating from a good school. The fact that her father said 'you chose the language department even worse' to her, implying that she was embarking on a path that could not be fought under these conditions, reveals the relationship between the chosen field of study and the income foreseen in the future.

An academic background with no financial return in the market is a source of worry for the father. The father considers it essential for his child to receive an education in a field

that will help her stand on her own feet. The institution's reputation and the degree must therefore meet social expectations. In this situation, the student is 'free' to choose one of two options: a field in which the market does not promise a material return but which he or she enjoys intellectually, or a field in which the market promises a material return but which he or she does not enjoy intellectually. As a result of rational thinking, individuals often choose the second option. Therefore, as Brown (2011) argues, neoliberalism extends its domain beyond the administration of the state to the human psyche.

A few of the participant students stated that, in addition to concern over the lack of financial return, their families found some university departments worthless for other reasons. The academic reputation of these departments was equated with failure.

A 10th-grade female student at the Imam Hatip high school conveyed her parents' views as follows:

"A person, for example, being interested in philosophy, sociology, or psychology—these kinds of things is just full of hot air (useless trivia).. A person is considered successful if they are a doctor, an engineer, or an architect. This is how they think." (H-RS-S(-)F1)

Her parents identified social and human sciences with failure and other fields of knowledge with success. The social perception of success conveyed to students through their families leads them to choose departments they do not want or to worry about their future even if they choose the department they want. In the examples given, students expressed their families' opinions in a critical way. They positioned themselves as thinking differently from their families. Some students internalized these messages from the market and accounted for them in their academic career decisions.

1.2. My abilities vs. my acceptances

Some students internalized and accepted their society's hierarchy of knowledge at the expense of furthering their unique abilities. Students whose skills were appreciated by their community but at the bottom of the value hierarchy considered their talents 'hobby activities' or 'obligations'. The Imam Hatip high school student, who was recognized in his social circle for his ability to read the Holy Quran well, explained his recognition in this field by saying, 'I had to do this (Quran recitation) when I failed in mathematics and other numerical courses' (L-RS-S(-) M2). The participant student, who had won degrees in provincial competitions in his field, said that if he had been successful in mathematics, he could have become 'even a mathematics teacher'. He stressed how desirable but unattainable such a position was for him.

"The subject I am successful in is the Quran side, the verbal side, so to speak. I believe I am successful in those areas. But even if I studied and barely passed math with a 50, that would be enough for me, let me put it that way. ... I mean, if I had been successful in math, I could have even become a math teacher. So, I realized that I am unsuccessful in that area, in the numerical field. I wish I could have gone to a big university and eventually become something there. I mean, I could have been a lawyer; I might have had such an ambition." (L-RS-S(-) M2)

The fact that he imagined going to a 'big university' and becoming 'something' indicates that the success he achieved through his talent in reciting Quran did not satisfy him. The student wanted to be successful in mathematics not because he enjoyed the field, but because he aspired toward the status and prestige that being 'something' provides in society. He understood that to achieve this respect he must study at a 'big university' that ranks high in the university league table (Apple, 2001).

Another participant student, more in tune with her abilities and interests, sought to strike a balance between the impositions of life and her own aspirations.

"In 10 years, I see myself—though this keeps changing—right now, I plan to study gastronomy and do a minor in philosophy. ... I want to do a minor in either psychology, sociology, or philosophy because, generally speaking, apart from psychology, philosophy and sociology are not fields with vast career opportunities. And I don't want to spend my life constantly waiting for an appointment or waiting for something to happen. I want to be active, have a steady income, be happy, but at the same time, continue pursuing my dreams. The things I choose as my minor are my dreams..." (H-RS-S(-)F)

The student stated, 'I don't want to wait to be appointed or to wait for something in my life'. This assertion underscored her concern that her dream fields of philosophy, sociology, and psychology would not offer her strong economic opportunities in the future. The student's wish that 'I want to have an income, I want to be happy, but at the same time, I want to continue my dreams', led her to plan a dual-track education. Thus, she envisioned majoring in gastronomy and minoring in philosophy. The student, torn between 'making a living' and 'achieving fulfillment', it can be said that by choosing gastronomy as a major she put the priorities of the market hierarchically above her wishes by placing philosophy in a minor position.

As Bernstein (2000) indicates, knowledge has been transformed into 'money' because it is valuable only if it is advantageous and efficient. By separating knowledge from people, the link between knowledge and the knower has been severed. From this point of view, it makes sense for families and students to prioritize acquiring knowledge that can bring them greater financial benefits in the future. The market assigns a value to professions and therefore disciplines in line with its needs. Students and their families who try to exist within the system aim to reach the 'most valuable' knowledge while ignoring the variables of their interests and abilities.

1.3. Neither inside nor outside the circle⁵

Students considered academic failures by the education system often look for alternative career paths. Although they see the likelihood of being academically successful as very low, they are wary to take the plunge and devote all their energies to an alternative route. They fear exiting the circle completely, although they do not think they can remain within the academic circle due to their unsuccessful ranking. Participant students who repeated a grade expressed that the success standards determined by the system may

⁵ This sub-section is named after the song "Çember"(circle), sung by Yeni Türkü (a Turkish band) and written as a poem by Turkish writer and poet Murathan Mungan.

not fit everyone. Still, they were hesitant about their alternative career paths. A male student studying at a vocational high school said that having an academic career was good and that it was necessary to pursue one of the 'professions that hold in this era'. However, he expressed how agonizing the thought of working in these professions was for him, asking, 'Do I have to commute to that job every day?'. In which he meant he has to spend time at that job every day even though he wouldn't experience a bit of joy. During the conversation, he shared, 'Sometimes I wonder if I can come to a place other than education'. This statement expresses his uncertainty about whether defining success outside the academic channel was possible. In a hypothetical scenario where the participant student remains within the educational system, he took a position that reinforced his place in the circle, stating:

"I mean, if I am very successful, I would do music as a hobby or something. Being a lawyer could be an option. Out of all the professions, only that one stands out—being a lawyer is good in a way." (H-VS-S(-)M)

The students stated during interviews that they did not enjoy the lessons and that getting up early in the morning and coming to school was a torment for them, comparing their schools to 'dungeons' and 'prisons'. These statements are similar to the behavior of the student group that Willis (2003) defines as 'lads'. Contrary to Willis' findings (2003), however, the participant students felt that academic success would help them access well-paying jobs. Here, there is a search for an alternative path that promises a future for the student who cannot exist within the system. However, the social acceptance of the relationship between academic achievement and a promising future in fields determined by the market has such an impact on students that they experience insecurity about pursuing these alternative paths. Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) help understand student insecurity through their thesis on the unequal distribution of information about job opportunities for students of different socioeconomic statuses. With the impact of neoliberal policies on educational programs and resources (Ball et al., 1994), the career paths of becoming a doctor, a teacher, or an engineer are clearly laid out through schools. However, gaining information about the career paths of musicianship—the student's field of interest—is challenging without the necessary social, cultural, and economic capital. This situation requires that the student risks pursuing a path without clear criteria for success.

2. Academic failure of the individual through the education system

Encouraged by neoliberal policies, the state ranked schools using centralized test scores to ensure standardization and efficiency control among educational institutions. Schools were thus held accountable for improving their performance indicators by monitoring their scores, which were updated every year (Apple, 2001). As a result, even schools with different education programs were ranked by the same standards. This system created a hierarchy between school types and even among schools of the same type. In Turkey, enrollment into schools required centralized exams with the Transition from Primary Education to Secondary Education (TEOG) system between 2013 and 2017. After 2017, only schools designated as 'Qualified Schools' continued to require examination. The

students participating in the study experienced the TEOG system in transition from primary to secondary education. While all students wanted to enter the schools that ranked highly, the centralized exam restricted their academic opportunities. Academic attainment mechanisms, which comprise achievement-based criteria designed to determine the schools students will attend (Oakes, 2005), ensure that students are educated in relatively homogeneous groups. The participating students were aware of this practice and believed that it had significant consequences for their future. Those who recognized the hierarchy between different school types—and the hierarchical ranking of schools within the same type—expressed feelings of sadness and regret about not being able to study at “better” schools. A female student studying at an Anatolian high school stated that her school ‘was not even on my list’ and that she expected to be placed in schools ranked much higher. In addition, she stated that:

"This was not the place I expected; in fact, it wasn't even on my list. I thought very poorly of this place and kept saying that I didn't want to go to any school in this district. Maybe this was a prejudice, I don't know, but it felt like students in other schools were happier. I would look at the appearance of other schools, and they seemed very beautiful, especially in other cities, but this place didn't seem nice to me." (L-AS-S(-)F)

Almost all the students participating in the study wanted to study at an Anatolian high school. The unbalanced distribution of the demand for school types can be considered a reflection of social structures on schools. McDermott (1974) mentioned that in the existing order, some people must be successful, and others must be unsuccessful. In line with the market's demand, the differences in status and earnings in occupational groups make high-status and high-income professions more attractive. To access those professions, following certain routes within the education system is necessary. Consequently, a student who wants to become an engineer targets an Anatolian high school. In a society where everyone wants to be an engineer, doctor, or business manager, all students are expected to aim for Anatolian high schools. Therefore, since it is out of the question for everyone to become an ‘engineer’, the system must distinguish between successful and unsuccessful students.

Students believe attending a higher-ranked high school will lead to acceptance into a more reputable university and profession. These student beliefs are supported by the findings of Alacacı and Erbaşı (2010) that the type of school highly impacts student achievement. Similarly, Kavurgacı and Selvitopu (2022) found that school type plays a crucial role in shaping students' experiences with their families, teachers, and social environments. Their study highlights that students encounter significantly different experiences based on the type of school they attend, and that school type is a major determinant in both their present and future opportunities. Schoville et al. (2024) further argue that elite public schools in Turkey establish a clear career trajectory for their students, steering them towards high-status professions rather than non-technical or lower-qualified jobs. This trajectory is reinforced through habitus, which is carefully shaped by familial cultural capital and a school culture that instills a sense of exceptionalism. By modeling expectations through peers, teachers, and administrators, these schools contribute to the reproduction of social and economic inequalities,

positioning elite students not only for academic success but also for a superior status in society.

This structured trajectory is not only reinforced within elite schools but is also deeply embedded in societal perceptions of school hierarchy. Beyond official ranking tables, society also upholds and transmits the hierarchy between schools. Students are exposed to evaluations about schools from the adults in their lives. A female student studying at an Anatolian high school explained why vocational high schools were not among her preferences by saying, 'In elementary school, our teachers used to tell us about vocational high schools in a very bad way' (L-AS-S(-)F). According to the student, teachers cited as factors that make vocational high schools disadvantageous that 'you cannot enter university' and 'you will work for a 2.5 times minimum wage at most'.

The teacher defined vocational high school as a barrier to university admission. The teacher warned that, without being placed in university, students would not earn enough money to provide for themselves and their families. This explanation, which ignores the student's personal interest and ability, is a rather mechanical cause-and-effect relationship that is assumed to be valid for everyone. Similar to the relationship Hayek (1995) established between scientific developments and the market order, the teacher established a correlational relationship between the type of school and the earning potential. The consequence of attending a vocational high school is not being placed in a university, and the consequence of not being placed in a university is settling for minimum wage. The neoliberal system places academic failure into a broader string of concurrent failures.

Almost all the participant students blamed themselves for their academic failure. They attributed their situation to not working hard enough. The Imam Hatip high school student explained that he went to the toilet and cried on the first day of school because he could not get into an Anatolian high school. He said that while crying, he thought, 'If I had studied a little more, I would have gone to a school I dreamed of' (L-RS-S(+)M). He asked himself, 'Why didn't I study?', and reminded himself of what he had lost, saying, 'I could have gone to the school of my dreams'. Believing himself responsible for his failure, he experienced deep 'regret'.

However, academic failure is not solely an individual matter but is also shaped by social background and structural inequalities. As Akçatepe et al. (2024) and Schoville et al. (2024) argue, school selection is influenced by the habitus of the home, which determines the educational choices available to students. Yet, despite these structural constraints, students often interpret their failure through a neoliberal lens, seeing it as a result of their own shortcomings rather than external conditions.

The fact that students hold themselves responsible for their academic failures gains meaning when considered in terms of neoliberal identity construction and individualism. According to a neoliberal understanding, an individual's success and failure stem entirely from himself/herself. Successes are associated with him/her being a good entrepreneur,

while failure is attributed to inadequately investing in one's education (Davies et al., 2006). Neoliberalism produces a competitive environment between individuals, and this competition surfaces in education in the form of exams. Bauman (2011, 19) stated that only the individual himself is praised or blamed for the 'good and bad' in his life. In this case, positive exam scores were understood as a result of students' diligence, while doing poorly on exams was attributed to laziness. As a natural consequence, the participant students were viewed as solely responsible for not being placed in the schools they wanted. The economic conditions, family traumas, or other abnormal situations in their lives are not associated with the results (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 24). An individual life also requires taking responsibility for unfortunate and unexpected events. According to the researchers, this understanding differentiates the 'life story' narrated by the individual from the 'biography'. While biographies include fact-based personal history, 'life stories' consist of individuals' explanations of events with self-entitled values, such as decision-making, negligence, ability, and overcoming (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The fact that students portray themselves as the source of their academic failure in their 'life stories' coheres with neoliberalism's individualist identity construction.

Students who did not score well enough on the exam to be placed in Anatolian high schools—which were established to prepare them for university education—still aim for professions that provide a good income and are accepted by society. Having this goal despite the school's curriculum means rowing against the current. Students stated that they were at a disadvantage compared to Anatolian high school students and that this represented a systematic injustice. In other words, even though they are tracked by the education system, they consider themselves in the same race and take the structural format of different types of schools as a threat to their individual success. A male student studying at a vocational high school mentioned that in the last two years of high school, they take internships and vocational courses instead of studying the subjects appearing in the university entrance exam. He drew attention to the fact that even though he was studying at a vocational high school, everyone was running the same race with the same goal, saying, 'we are both taking the same exam'. He emphasized that he was in a much more disadvantaged position compared to students studying at Anatolian high schools, saying, 'I think we should make more effort than them' (L-VS-S(+)M). Paradoxically, the student perceived the fact that vocational high schools fulfilled their founding function by implementing their own curriculum as an 'injustice'.

The school's vocational courses and internship programs were seen as barriers to preparing for the university entrance exam. Even though students are subjected to academic ranking by the education system and assigned to different tracks, they still try to achieve the same goal: to pursue the natural sciences, engineering, and applied sciences (Hayek, 1995), which the market considers valid and valuable. A similar situation applies to Imam Hatip high schools. L-RS-S(+)F complained about the weight of religious education courses in the curriculum and expressed concern about failing these courses, stating, 'my GPA will drop'. She complained that when she spent time on these courses in order to maintain her high GPA, she could not focus on the courses that were within the scope of the exam, which she characterized as 'normal courses'. As a

reminder that even though they are in different schools, everyone is running towards the same goal, she expressed, 'After all, we will take the same exam, and the exam does not include *siyar*, *fiqh*, or *Quran*'.

Participant students who attended another type of religiously oriented school also viewed religious courses as an obstacle to their success. Stating that these courses would not help them in the university entrance exam, a student again blamed the education system for their possible failure. As a result of the academic attainment mechanism of the education system, students could not go to a high school suitable for their goals. Therefore, they were not the victims of their own 'choices' but of an 'allocation' process (McDermott, 1977).

Results and Discussion

This research is based on the data obtained from interviews with 10th-grade students studying in two different districts of Istanbul, Turkey—one with the lowest and the other with the highest life quality indexes—to reveal the relationship between neoliberal policies and students' educational preferences and perception of academic failures. With the implementation of neoliberal education policies in Turkey, the competitive education approach has become much more visible in the education system. The ranking tables in all sub-units of education have led to clear distinctions between schools and fields of knowledge based on whether they are within the scope of the exams. These distinctions, in turn, have reshaped society's perception of success and failure in schooling and the value judgements associated with various academic fields.

This study revealed that society's assumptions around success affect students' academic failures. Families want their children to choose departments that lead to professions that are seen as socially successful, ignoring their predispositions and talents. Likewise, despite their success in other fields, students want to pursue careers considered successful (lawyers, engineers, doctors, etc.), determined by market demands (Bernstein, 2000). Monetizability determines the value of particular fields and occupations. Therefore, students widely desire fields and professions with high market value, aspiring toward identical goals regardless of their unique predispositions and abilities. This situation—where students with different characteristics try to reach the same goal—results in the failure of certain groups. As stated by Bourdieu and Passeron (1964), the socioeconomic status of individuals is effective in orientation towards professions with high market value. Individuals with high economic and cultural capital can make 'arbitrary-based' rather than 'money-based' choices. On the other hand, individuals without this capital must meet the market's demands to guarantee their future. The fact that certain career paths are less known than market-determined career paths discourages participants from pursuing alternative professions.

This study also found that the market's prioritization of particular fields impacts student career plans. Students make 'rational' choices by accepting their parents' warnings or adopting this value ranking themselves. These preferences generally direct students

toward knowledge areas where the market promises high income. In conclusion, this study confirms the concerns of Wendy Brown, mentioned at the beginning of this article. Participant students considered success in mathematics more valuable than in fields such as sports, arts, religious studies, philosophy, sociology, or linguistics. Similarly, in Smith's (2010) study, students associated success in mathematics with success in their future careers and general happiness. Rodeiro (2007) found that high school students considered traditional subject areas such as mathematics, chemistry, or biology more important than areas such as psychology or media. In the United Kingdom, students enrolled in an art course said they would like to continue with art in their futures, but as a hobby in addition to their full-time jobs (Thomson et al., 2020).

This study's findings elucidate the hierarchical order among school types in the Turkish education system. The demand for schools correlates with the income level and earning status they promise in the future. Almost all students, therefore, aspire to attend Anatolian high schools, which rank highest among Turkish high schools. As a result of academic attainment mechanisms, all students—except those placed in the few top-ranked schools—consider themselves academically unsuccessful.

Research indicates that academic failure is explained by the family's socioeconomic status by 38% (Karaağaç, 2019:11). Broader findings show that an individual's social, economic, and cultural capital is the main determinant of access to higher education. Additionally, social class—shaped by parental education, profession, and income—significantly influences students' educational trajectories and their ability to navigate the system effectively (Bülbül, 2021). Despite these structural constraints, the majority of students in this study held themselves responsible for their academic failure. The education system claims to put forward a fair and impartial system based on meritocratic values. In this system, the scores obtained according to the evaluation criteria are decisive, and students are placed based on their scores. However, in this system, the unique circumstances of the students and the level of support they received during the education process are ignored. The belief that assessments are merit-based is so dominant that even students stated that they failed because they did not work hard enough. The fact that students ignored their disadvantageous situations and blamed themselves for academic failure underscores the widespread individualist approach in society. The individualistic understanding in neoliberalism places the consequences of all kinds of unfortunate events in life on the individual. No matter the circumstances, the student must make the right investment at the right time to score well on exams (Davies et al., 2006). With four decades of neoliberal influence, Turkey's educational system provides one of the best representations of how neoliberalism has reconfigured understandings of education, failure, and self.

Recommendations

Future research on academic failure should focus on specific student groups, such as male and female students who have failed a grade, to explore potential differences in their perceptions of failure. Additionally, ethnographic studies could provide deeper insights into how cultural contexts shape students' understanding of academic success and failure. Since this study was conducted in public schools, it did not fully capture the perspectives of upper-class students. A similar study in private schools would help highlight differences in how academic achievement is perceived across socio-economic groups. Furthermore, qualitative research on parental perceptions of academic success across different socio-economic backgrounds would be valuable in understanding how family influence shapes students' attitudes toward failure.

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Genişletilmiş Türkçe Özet

Neoliberal politikalar, eğitimi, piyasanın ihtiyaç duyduğu beceri ve bilgiyi sağlayacak insan sermayesini yetiştiren bir araç olarak görmektedir. Eğitim sürecinde kazanılan beceriler ve davranış kalıpları, üretken bir iş gücü olarak piyasaya geri dönmelidir. Bu anlayış, teknolojik ve uygulamalı bilgiyi yüceltir ve eğitimi, girişimci bireyler yetiştiren bir sistem haline getirir. Okulların başarısını değerlendiren sıralama sistemleri, öğrencinin performansına odaklanmıştır. Bu sistemde, öğrencinin okula katkısı, okulun öğrenciye katkısından daha önemli hale gelmiştir.

Wendy Brown (2011), bugün beşeri bilimlerin kamu üniversitelerinde yok olma tehlikesiyle karşı karşıya olduğunu ifade etmektedir. Neoliberal piyasa mantığı, rasyonel ve ölçülebilir göstergeler talep ederek, finansal gücü ve talebi olmayan akademik alanların değerini azaltmıştır. Bu bağlamda eğitim, bireyin amaçlarına hizmet eden bir araç haline gelmiştir. Neoliberal ideolojinin benimsenmesi, eğitimin bir ürün veya sektör olarak değerlendirilmesine yol açmıştır. Eğitim kurumları, kâr arayan şirketlere dönüşmüştür ve bu sistem, öğrenciyi (ve bazen aileyi) kendi kendine yatırım yapmaktan sorumlu tutmaktadır.

Pierre Bourdieu, okulların belirli bir kültürü aktaran kurumlar olarak sosyal yeniden üretimi sağladığını ve bu süreçte çocukları dışladığını savunmaktadır. Neoliberal anlayışta bireyler, kendi eylemlerinden ve refahlarından sorumludur. Eğitimde, bireyler kendilerini geliştirmek ve doğru seçimler yapmak zorundadırlar. Başarı veya başarısızlık, bireyin kendisinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Bu sistem, ekonomik ve sosyal eşitsizlikleri göz ardı ederek bireysel sorumluluğu vurgulamaktadır.

Dolayısıyla, öğrencilerin akademik başarısızlık algılarını ve bu algıların farklı bilgi alanlarıyla nasıl ilişkilendirildiğini ortaya koyan nitel bir çalışma alana önemli bir katkı sağlayacak ve mevcut literatürü tamamlayacaktır. Bu çalışma, özellikle eğitim alanındaki neoliberal politikalar ile öğrencilerin akademik başarısızlık ve başarı yorumlamaları arasındaki ilişkiyi ortaya koymayı amaçlamıştır.

Bu nitel araştırma, İstanbul'un en yüksek ve en düşük yaşam kalitesi endekslerine sahip iki farklı ilçesindeki 10. sınıf öğrencileri ile yapılan fenomenolojik görüşmelere dayanmaktadır. Okul türü, ilçe, cinsiyet ve başarı puanına göre farklılaşan toplamda 24 öğrenci ile derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Bu öğrenciler seçilen okullarda 10. Sınıfta okuyan toplam 1085 öğrenciden 1048'inin formlarında yer alan demografik bilgileri ve başarısızlık hikayeleri incelenerek ve maksimum çeşitlilik örneklem türü benimsenerek seçilmiştir.

Araştırmanın sonucunda ortaya çıkan bulgular eğitimde uygulanan neoliberal politikaların öğrenciler üzerindeki etkisini pek çok açıdan ortaya koymaktadır.

Piyasa, taleplerini ve ihtiyaçlarını topluma çeşitli kanallar aracılığıyla iletmektedir. Öğrenciler bu mesajları kendileri yorumlamakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda ailelerinden de duymaktadırlar. "Açıkta kalırsın" ifadesi, mevcut pozisyonların dolu olduğunu ve birey

için fırsat kalmadığını ifade eder. Bu terim, tercih ettikleri okullara yeterli puanı alamayan veya mezun olduktan sonra iş bulamayan öğrenciler için sıklıkla kullanılır. Bireyin, "işe yarayan" bir pozisyon elde edememesi, etkili para kazanma imkanlarının olmaması anlamına gelir ve bireyi "açıkta" bırakır.

Bazı öğrenciler, toplumlarının bilgi hiyerarşisini kendi benzersiz yetenekleri pahasına içselleştirip kabul etmişlerdir. Toplum tarafından takdir edilen ancak düşük değer verilen yetenekler, "hobi faaliyetleri" veya "zorunluluklar" olarak görülmüştür. Bir İmam Hatip lisesi öğrencisi, Kur'an okuma yeteneği ile tanınmasına rağmen, "Matematikte ve diğer sayısal derslerde başarısız olduğumdan bunu yapmak zorunda kaldım" demiştir. Başka bir öğrenci, kendi yeteneklerine ve ilgi alanlarına daha uyumlu olan bir denge kurmaya çalışmıştır. Bu öğrenci, hayatındaki dayatmalar ile kendi arzuları arasında bir denge kurma çabasını dile getirmiştir.

Eğitim sistemi tarafından akademik başarısız olarak değerlendirilen öğrenciler, alternatif kariyer yolları arayışına girmektedir. Ancak, akademik başarı şanslarının düşük olduğunu görmelerine rağmen, alternatif bir yola tam anlamıyla adım atmaktan çekinmektedirler. Meslek lisesinde okuyan bir erkek öğrenci, akademik kariyerin önemini kabul ettiğini ancak bu mesleklerde çalışma düşüncesinden nefret ettiğini belirtmiştir. Bu öğrenci, eğitim sistemi içinde kalmanın önemini kabul ettiğini ve avukat olmayı düşündüğünü ifade etmiştir.

Neoliberal politikaların teşvikiyle devlet, okulları merkezi test puanları kullanarak derecelendirmiş ve standartlaşmayı sağlamıştır. Türkiye'de TEOG sistemi ile öğrenciler merkezi sınav sonuçlarına göre lise tercihlerini yapıyorlardı. Bu sınav, öğrencilerin akademik fırsatlarını sınırlamıştır. Katılımcı öğrenciler, bu uygulamanın gelecekleri üzerindeki önemli etkisinin farkında olduklarını ve daha iyi okullara gidememekten dolayı üzüntü ve pişmanlık hissettiklerini belirtmişlerdir.

Bu çalışma, neoliberal politikaların öğrencilerin eğitim tercihleri ve akademik başarısızlık algıları üzerindeki etkisini ortaya koymaktadır. Aileler, çocuklarının toplumda başarılı görülen mesleklere yönelmesini istemekte ve öğrencilerin kendi eğilim ve yeteneklerini göz ardı etmektedirler. Benzer şekilde, öğrenciler de diğer alanlarda başarılı olmalarına rağmen, piyasa talepleri tarafından belirlenen kariyerleri hedeflemektedirler. Bu durum, farklı özelliklere sahip öğrencilerin aynı hedefe ulaşmaya çalışması sonucunu doğurmakta ve belirli grupların başarısızlığına yol açmaktadır. Bu durumun sonucunda başarısızlık yaşayan öğrenciler başarısızlıklarını kişisel bir yetersizlik olarak değerlendirmektedirler.

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