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A Narrative Study of Factors Influencing Students' Academic Achievement: Views of Parents, Teachers and Union Leaders

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Abstract

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Keywords

Student Achievement, Socio-Economic and Cultural Status, School Administration, Narrative Research

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A Narrative Study of Factors Influencing Students' Academic Achievement: Views of Parents, Teachers and Union Leaders

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This paper reports on private school teachers, parents, and teacher union leaders' experiences with middle and high schools in a small city in northeastern Turkey to identify the problems in education and study them to develop some solutions for them. This narrative study was carried out in the Spring semester of 2012 by conducting face-to-face individual in-depth interviews with 47 participants. Personal narratives were analyzed by developing themes. Findings reveal that the success and lack of it in education arises from the upper level management style, from uninterested parents, and the geographical conditions and location of the city create big problems. Also, parents' cultural background is more significant than their economic background. Keywords: Student Achievement, Socio-Economic and Cultural Status, School Administration, Narrative Research

Introduction

In Turkey there is a nationwide university entrance exam, which places students in the university according to their scores on this exam. This exam is administered once a year after students finish high school and it measures students' analytical thinking and reading skills. The students' future is determined by this one exam and if they are sick on the day of the exam, they have to take the exam the following year. So, it is kind of a make it or break it exam and all their education future is measured by the performance on this exam.

Because it is such an important exam almost all students prepare for this exam by getting extra tutorials from private preparatory schools, which are called dershane (which literally translates as lecture-house). These private preparatory courses (dershane) prepare students for this exam by giving them after school and weekend classes on various subjects that are addressed on the exam. In Turkey, students in high school have to choose their track of study at the end of their first year of high school, choosing from three tracks: mathematics, science, or social science studies. Students who choose social science studies or vocational high schools have very few science and math classes throughout their high school years, and this deficiency needs to be rectified at a later time in these private preparatory courses. These private schools charge some amount, but usually parents from middle and lower middle class can afford these preparatory courses. Therefore, the majority of high school students go to these private courses and teachers in these private institutions are in contact with a lot of students who prepare for the exam.

Parents pay for these private courses and hope that their kids are getting prepared well for the exam, because their kids' future will be determined by this exam. The students located in the province and city of this study have performed very poorly in this exam; out of 81 provinces it was ranked 80th, which means that the education system is failing students in this city because they cannot get into university. In Turkey in 2011, a total of 1,759,403 students took the university entrance exam and only 789,169 students (success ratio of 44.9%) were accepted into university. The province where the city is located had a total of 5,793 students

who took the exam and only 1,544 students (success ratio of 26.65%) were accepted into university, which means that the province is performing very poorly on the exam (Yüksek Öğretim Kurumu [YOK], 2020).

Having fewer students going into university has had negative implications for the city. For instance, young people have to immigrate to the big cities to get jobs in the factories, which means separating families or having young people with no jobs, which means an increase in crime rates, and low growth and productivity in the community (Huang et al., 2004). To address this situation, leaders in the province decided to convene a symposium in order to identify all the problems in education in this province. I entered voluntarily into this research project with an aim to contribute to this symposium being quite interested in questions that explored students' success and lack of it in relation to the university entrance exam in this city. I did some research on teacher effectiveness in public schools, so I tried to look for other points of views coming from private school teachers, parents, and teacher union leaders who are also very involved with students. We formed two groups to tackle this problem of lack of success in the university entrance exam. One group lead by another researcher looked at this problem by asking students, principals, and public school teachers' views. Our group lead by me looked at this problem by asking parents, teacher union leaders, and private school teachers' views. The research assistants conducted the interviews and I analyzed the data and presented it at the symposium.

The purpose of this study was to identify the problem of lack of success in the university entrance exam with a hope to give some solutions to it using the views of private school teachers, parents, and teacher union leaders. In this paper, I report on the private school teachers, parents, and teacher union leaders' experiences with middle and high schools in a particular city in northeastern Turkey using a narrative research design with an aim to explore more in-depth their views. This is significant because, this helps us see the problems facing education and the factors influencing students' success in these schools in this region and addressing the education problems might have positive implications to the region such as decrease in immigration and crime rates.

Literature Review

Factors influencing students' academic achievement are the most discussed issues in education literature among legislators, education leaders, teachers, and educational researchers (Bruggencate et al., 2012; Bryk et al., 2010; Day et al., 2016; Gu & Johansson, 2013; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2006; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson et al., 2008; Sirin, 2005). But in this study, I will concentrate more specifically on family socio-economic status, teacher and educational leaders' effect on students' academic achievement, because they were the most cited reasons for lack of success in schools in the literature.

Research on Family Socio-Economic Status

In the literature numerous factors are mentioned about students' school success, but some are mentioned more than others. One of the most commonly stated factors is students' family socio-economic status (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Berliner, 2006; Chevalier & Lanot, 2002; Sirin, 2005; White, 1982). Chevalier and Lanot (2002), in their study of British pupils used two surveys to observe the development of a cohort of children at different points in time and said that students coming from lower economic family backgrounds perform less successfully in school than other students, but how exactly the economic status influences the school success is not clear enough. Therefore, researchers supported the family economically from outside (by giving them additional financial support) and separated family's socio-cultural background

from their economic background and found that this did not improve students' success in school, and so concluded that family's socio-cultural background was more important than its economic background (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Chevalier & Lanot, 2002). On the other side, Gonzales et al. (1996), in their quantitative study of 120 African American 7th grade junior high school students, argue that variables such as parents' educational level and family socio-economic status cannot alone be linked with students' academic success; other variables such as academic support from parents, siblings, and friends can play important roles in students' success. Additionally, the location of the school indirectly provides social capital, that is, supportive relationships among structural forces and individuals (i.e., parent-school collaborations) that promote the sharing of societal norms and values, which are necessary for success in school (Coleman, 1988; Dika & Singh, 2002, as cited in Sirin, 2005).

Research on Teacher Effect on Students' Academic Achievement

Another factor influencing students' academic success in school is the teacher. According to a quantitative study conducted in New Jersey, US, by Rockoff (2003), teachers' academic backgrounds (e.g., educational level, schools they studied at) and teachers' teaching experience greatly influenced students' success. However, increasing teachers' salaries and improving their economic status did not show any improvement in students' success in school. A quantitative study of the impact of American teachers' degrees on student performance in four subject areas by Goldhaber and Brewer (1996) found that a teacher's level of education in science and mathematics had a positive effect on students' success in these subjects in school. However, they concluded that a teacher's level of education in history and literature did not have any positive or negative effect on students' success in these subjects in school. They also found that teachers' teaching experience did not have any significant effect on students' success in school. On the contrary, they found that a teachers' gender played a significant role in students' success in science and mathematics. For example, test scores of White female students in mathematics and science did not increase more rapidly when the teacher was a White woman as compared to when the teacher was a White man, but White female teachers evaluated their White female students more highly than did White male teachers (Ehrenberg et al., 1995).

Research on Educational Leaders' Effect on Students' Academic Achievement

Another factor influencing students' academic success in school is educational leaders' (e.g., principals and administrators) performance. Traditionally, school leaders are perceived as usually dealing with schools' upkeep and repair, furnishings, buying stationery materials, and bureaucratic correspondence. Marks and Printy (2003) conducted a study that employed several of the quantitative and qualitative instruments in which teachers responded to a survey querying them about their instructional practices, professional activities, and perceptions of their school and its organization. Teams of three researchers conducted interviews with 25-30 staff members. Marks and Printy (2003) said that this traditional perception of school leaders has changed with the reform movements in education; now it is expected that school leaders be the front-runners in changing and reforming the school and that school administrators can solve these real problems with transformative and innovative approaches. School leaders must be willing to share their responsibilities with others and must be willing to accept criticism for this kind of approach to succeed in schools. According to Marks and Printy (2003) only transformative and innovative management approaches can help schools in creating an effective learning environment. When transformational and shared instructional leadership

coexist in an integrated form of leadership, the influence on school performance, as measured by the quality of its pedagogy and the achievement of its students, is substantial.

As seen from the literature review above, all these studies came from Western countries and were mostly quantitative survey studies. I tried to look differently and approach this study by conducting my research in a developing country using a qualitative approach. The aim of this study was to figure out the problems affecting students' academic success in middle and high schools by asking parents, private school teachers, and teacher union leaders for their views on the issue and to get their views on the solution of those problems in the case of a small city in Turkey. The hope is that this might help us find ways to improve students' academic success in school in this small city and shed some light for other parts of the world in general. The study tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the problems facing you in education in this city?
2. How can we solve these problems in education in this city?

Researcher Context

I am a researcher from Turkey and studied science education. I am interested in research that examines teacher effectiveness, the nature of science, and analogies in science teaching. My most recent research examines effective teaching and especially science teacher effectiveness. I entered this research project interested in questions that explored students' success and lack of it in schools in a small city in Turkey where I live with an intention to identify the problems in education and give some solutions to them. My theoretical assumption was that these issues could be addressed by using a narrative research design and asking the people who are very involved with the students to identify why the students in this city perform very poorly in the nationwide university entrance exam.

Methods

In this study I employed a narrative research design in collecting data. Narrative research designs, as Creswell (2002) describes them, are inquiries that "describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people's lives, and write narratives of individual experiences" (p. 521). As such, by using this research design and utilizing in-depth interviews, this study explored the "individual experiences" of parents and teachers in a particular city. This study focused on problems and solutions facing parents and teachers in helping their students' academic success in a particular small city in Turkey. These personal narratives were analyzed by developing themes and grouping these themes under categories that answer the research questions.

Participants

Participants were identified and recruited by consulting the other group who wanted to study the students, public school teachers, and principals, so our group concentrated on parents, private school teachers (in Turkey there are exam preparation schools, which are mostly on weekends where private teachers give after school courses to prepare students for nationwide high school and university exams; the teachers in this study were from these private schools), and teacher union leaders (these union leaders were teachers working in public schools and were representing the teachers against the government). So these participants were included with an aim to interview a wide range of involved people. These participants were asked to be included in the study by going to their work places and explaining the study to them and asking

whether they would be willing to participate in the study and getting their permission to be included in the study. We had a hard time finding willing participants. Only teacher union leaders were more willing to participate, parents and private school teachers showed time constraints as a reason for not participating in the study. Private school teachers were 20, teacher union leaders were 10, and 17 were parents. A total of 47 (43 male and 4 female) participants participated in this study. Most of them (35) were college graduates, 3 held master's degrees, 1 had a doctorate, 5 were high school graduates, 1 was a community college graduate, and 2 went to school until 5th grade. Thirty two of the participants were teachers, 3 were university lecturers, 2 were civil servants, 1 was a small market owner, 1 was a bazaar seller, 1 was a jeweler, 2 were drivers, 2 were school principals, 2 were career soldiers, and 1 was an army officer. Nine of the participants were natives of the city, 18 of the participants were living more than 5 years in the city, and 20 were living under 5 years in the city where the study was conducted. Most of the participants (39) had both computer and Internet in their home, one participant had a computer but no Internet, and 7 participants had no computer or Internet in their homes. However, one participant said that even though they had no computer and Internet in the house their kids were accessing the Internet through cell phones. The participants who said that they did not have computer and Internet in their homes were high school or lesser graduates.

These demographics show that the views expressed in this study will be mostly representing the male perspective and that teacher union leaders and private course teachers (teachers who give after school courses to prepare students to prepare them for the nationwide high school and university exams) were mostly male and females are underrepresented in these institutions, and how Turkey has a long way to go in achieving gender equality in those institutions, given the fact that majority (54.3%) of teachers in Turkey are females.

Data Collection

The study was conducted in Spring semester of 2012; data were collected through face-to-face individual in-depth interviews with private school teachers, parents, and teacher union leaders in a small northeastern city in Turkey. After securing ethics approval from our university, participants were asked to tell their stories about their experiences with the schools and students. In-depth and open-ended interviews, as Bogdan and Biklen (1998) write, "allows the subjects to answer from their own frame of reference rather than from one structured by prearranged questions" (p. 3). Also, the study used a loosely structured interview guide (see Appendix), as recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), in order to "get the subjects to freely express their thoughts around particular topics" (p. 3).

Narrative studies may have a specific contextual focus, such as teachers or parents (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002), or the stories told about organizations (Czarniawska, 2004). In this study, the topic was problems and solutions facing students' academic success and the focus was on private school teachers' and parents' views. The researcher developed the loosely structured interview questions used in this study with the help of a colleague. A semi (loosely)-structured interview is open, allowing new ideas to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says. Research assistants went with semi-structured interview guides (Appendix) in their hands and searched for willing participants, each of the five assistants had on average 10 participants (one 8, one 9 and the rest 10). Interviews were conducted in participants' offices or homes by getting their permission and were recorded on a digital voice recorder and later transferred to a PC computer with the help of the research assistants. Interviews varied in length some lasting half an hour and most more than an hour.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Turkish, later on the researcher translated them into English. While translating the researcher tried to give meaning to the

Turkish phrases, but some are very cultural so it maybe that some English speakers will have a hard time understanding them.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I used the “analysis of narratives” (Polkinghorne (1995, p. 12) approach to create descriptions of themes that hold across stories. Researchers might detail themes that arise from the story to provide a more detailed discussion of the meaning of the story (Creswell, 2002; Huber & Whelan, 1999). Thus, the qualitative data analysis may be a description of both the story and themes that emerge from it (Creswell, 2002). In the end, “the narrative study tells the story of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social, and historical context, and including the important themes in those lived experiences” (Wulff et al., 2015, p. 57). This study used this approach too.

Interviews were transcribed in the Spring semester of 2012 and later coded according to emerging themes. The first step in the analysis was data organization procedures recommended by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). In organizing the data, the researcher revisited each interview and listened to each audiotape while reviewing the transcripts to ensure the accuracy of data. Each participant’s interview transcript was later analyzed according to data analysis procedures described by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and Creswell (2002), which call for the development of coding categories, mechanical sorting of data, and analysis of data within each coding category. For example, while reading the following transcript:

To tell you the truth, we say we are soldiers and don’t get involved. As I tell you before, I didn’t go to school for about one year now. The problem might be in us. By not going to school, we might be saying to our kids you are not valued. (Lvnt2)

The researcher coded this view as inattentive parents and the following transcript:

There is a transportation rather than education problem here. I sent my kids at least 45 minutes earlier to school. And expenses are extra this affects education too. The transportation reduces kids’ attention to the classes. (Lvnt7m)

The researcher coded as city location (the region of the city is very mountainous and very steep, there is one curvy main road and it is hard to navigate with a car, so teachers and students have a hard time going to school, that is why this code come up so much in the interviews). Other codes were students’ study environment in the home, lack of school leadership, teacher problems, everybody is responsible, students’ lack of interest in education, curriculum problems, teachers and administrators are responsible, beatings in schools, collaboration is a must, teachers must be interested in students, successful teachers must be awarded. More than 200 codes were formed from the interviews.

These initial codes were then grouped into emergent main themes and sub-themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell, 2002). The identification of themes “provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding an individual’s experience” (Creswell, 2002, p. 530). For example, codes identified as problems arising from the upper level (superintendent, governor, and ministers) management style were grouped under that theme, codes about parents who are not very involved with their kids were grouped under the uninterested parents theme. Also, codes such as too much teacher circulation, and local teachers are marginalized were grouped under problems arising from the teachers theme. So later, these themes were collapsed into the three categories of educational problems in the

city, solutions to educational problems in the city, and students' study environment. In the retelling phase these themes were initially collapsed into two categories (problems in the city and solutions to the problems in the city in order to answer the two research questions, but a third category, students' study environment, was added with an assumption that it might influence the two research questions and give a reader a view on students' study habits.

Rigor

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness the researcher tried to put as many quotations from the participants as possible for every emerging theme and sub-theme, so that the reader can form their own meanings from those quotations and read them from their own background, because they may be different from that of the researcher. Providing rich and thick description is used to obtain transferability (Creswell, 2002). It also promotes study credibility as well, so that the reader can evaluate the extent to which the conclusions made by the authors are transferable to other settings, situations, and populations (Creswell, 2002).

Data Presentation

In this study, a realist mode (giving voice to participants) was used to represent the participants' views through quotations and interpretations of those quotations (Creswell, 2002; Van Maanen, 1988). The researcher shares Roth and Lucas' (1997) view that informants' talk about attitudes and beliefs are dependent on context and are highly variable within a given individual. Rather than reflecting individual beliefs, informants' "talk reflects the communities and language games in which they participate, for there are no private languages" (Roth et al., 1997, p. 147). Thus, the researcher makes no claims that the data gathered represents informants' permanent and deep-seated views; rather he read them as socially constructed in the moment. So with improvement of infrastructure in the city the problems mentioned by the informants might change over time. While the qualitative researcher intends to tell a story from the view of the participants, he or she can never divorce the words of the participants from his interpretations of them and therefore, the researcher's "biography, politics, and relationships become part of the fabric of the field" (Bell, 1993, p. 41). This study was conducted in 2012, but was first submitted for publication in English in 2018, because translation took time. The purpose for publishing in English was to reach wider audiences.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this research. First, the sample was one of volunteers who were willing to participate in the study. These individuals are not necessarily representative of other parents and teachers. Therefore, the results are limited to this group of parents, teachers, and union leaders and caution should be exercised when attempting to infer about any of the results with regard to other populations. Second, the researcher was the main instrument of data analysis. The analyses and results are a product of the researcher's interpretation of the data. The interpretation was based on the researcher's knowledge and experience in education and his social location. Therefore, the theory-laden nature of the investigation is a recognized limitation as well as its strength. An exploratory study is the product of the researcher's perspective, and it is recognized that a different researcher may identify different features of importance within the same data sets (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell, 2002). Another limitation was the limited number of participants and the overwhelming male dominance in them. Thus, these data are only indicative of the type of the city and setting in which these parents and teachers worked. City location comes up very often

in this study; it may be that other cities in Turkey will have other problems, but the city which is the location of the study is right on the border and far from the big cities such as Ankara or İstanbul and does not have big city services or advantages. For example, there is no theater and only one cinema.

Results

Findings are presented in three categories: students' study environment, educational problems in the city, and solutions to educational problems in the city. Some of the categories are divided into sub-categories starting with the most frequently occurring in the interviews. Quotations used as an example for one emerging theme may also explain another emerging theme. Also, every quotation used in this study was taken from a different participant.

Students' Study Environment

This short category was added with an aim to give the reader a view on students' study habits. More than half of the participants said that their kids needed some kind of support or incentive to study, which means that kids are not very interested in the school and are not willing to invest some time for study on their own. For example, one participant said, "We don't guide them to study in a proper way. Let's say homework or other things are not done properly." Some of the participants (13) said that their children were studying on their own on a day-to-day basis, 8 participants said that their kids were studying with the support of a mother, father, or sister. Six participants said that their kids only did the homework given to them, 1 participant said that the mother did the homework, 2 said that kids were studying watching television, and one said that he can make his kids study only by bribing them. One participant said that children were studying only during exam times. Five participants said that their kids did not play too much computer games, but 4 said that their kids spent too much time in front of the computer playing games. For example, one participant said, "Kids instead of reading they always solve test problems. They don't read anything, in their free time they either play PlayStation or look into Facebook, Twitter or on the computer." Some of the participants (18) said that they had a separate study room in their house. Most of the participants said that they did not know their kids' friends, but 6 participants said that they did know their kids' friends and that their friends were good.

Educational Problems in the City

Participants in this study said that the success and lack of it in education arises from the upper level management style, from uninterested parents, the geographical conditions and location of the city create big problems, and that mainly the teachers are responsible. Moreover, they said that everybody is responsible, that the curriculum frequently changes and the ratio of students attending vocational high school in this city is high. Findings in this category are divided in ten sub-categories and they are as follows:

Problems Arising from the Upper Level Administrators' Management Style

Half of the participants (23) said that the success and lack of it in education arises from the upper level (superintendent, governor, and ministers) management style and that they are responsible for the lack of achievement in education. Here are some views:

Generally there are problems arising with upper-level management. For example, keeping the dormitories open during spring break. Arranging one day to administer try-out test in public schools. Our physical facilities are not enough to make such large test exams, because of that we do our tests at evenings. In the past they were letting us use the public schools' classrooms, we were doing our large try-out tests on the weekends. Later, with one notice they forbid it. (Mlk1)

... how should I say it, I don't believe the people on the top do their job properly enough. I don't know the name of the superintendent now, but there are too many problems arising from him, I see it this way, because he doesn't know his job. (Mlk4)

First of all, the head, if the captain of the ship is good the crew will look good too. But if the captain of the ship drives the ship left or right, the crew will be like that. I think problems are not in one place. Thus, if one apple started rotting in one place and if you put it with the rest of the apples they will rotten too. We have to dive into the core of the issue. We are using the program written in 1924 by John Dewey. The socio-economical issues in America and Turkey are not the same.... (Mlk2)

... As a teachers union we believe in the philosophy that the fish starts smelling from the head. Competent people must be appointed as leaders, away from political influences. We as a union are working on a project were only competent and able people can be appointed as administrators... For example, the superintendent in ... town is appointed unlawfully, with some shenanigans. We are against that. This is result of previous superintendent's insensitivity. His failure in Turkey is obvious with exam results, but he only deal with it by interrogating teachers, he did not question himself at all. The old superintendent was an example of a political appointment. (Mstf8)

Of course, now there are some communication problems here.... For example, we cannot go and talk to the superintendent. On this point the superintendent and few people around him, I don't say all, because there some people, some friends of mine, who know the problems and want to do something. But the problem is the superintendent and the few people around him. I did not meet with him in particular and he does not care to meet and talk with me. Because he looks at us as a union from a political point of view, thus, this political view should change. If it doesn't change there will be problems in education in this city. (Mlk9)

Problems Arising from Parents

Half of the participants (20) complained about problems arising from parents:

As a parent, in middle school, relationship with school was good, but now the school is far and I cannot find time from work. It is not because I don't value my son. (Lvnt1ş)

To tell you the truth, we say we are soldiers and don't get involved. As I tell you before, I didn't go to school for about one year now. The problem might be in us. By not going to school, we might be saying to our kids you are not valued. (Lvnt2)

I didn't go to my kid's school at all, the whole problem is in me. In our culture, the women work and males sit in the coffeehouse. My spouse only brings the money from selling the hazelnut. (Lvnt8pt)

As a bus driver, I cannot stay at home for long time and naturally I don't have any relations with school. Other than talking on the phone and asking about their work I don't have any interest in my kids' schools. (Lvnt10ş)

In the last years there is some trend developing in the parents. "I sent them to school, I sent them to private preparatory weekend schools, we completed our responsibility, from now on it is the responsibility of the schools and the private preparatory weekend schools" this kind of parent profile started developing now. This is not a good way to go for the parents. (Mlk1)

I say first of all parents. If we look at most of our parents they are uninterested. Because they are uninterested they are like I sent them to school they can do whatever they want there... We see parents who even don't know which grade their kid is, what the age is, when is their birthday, can you believe it! If we turn this into numbers I think it is over 15% I say it without exaggerating. (Mlk7)

I think families' support for education and communication is low here..... Parents shouldn't leave their kids in school and leave all the responsibility on the shoulders of the schools. This can create one-sided responsibility in students. Schools' feel this lack of interest, they feel like parents don't appreciate their work and won't support them. We care for the students; we give them home works and follow through them, we try to deal with their problems, but we don't know where exactly the parents stand. (Mlk8)

These views show that parents play an important role in students' success, but the participants in this study showed lack of interest in their children and left everything to the hands of the schools and teachers. The authorities in this city must address this issue.

Problems Arising from the Geography

Half of the participants (19) said that the geographical conditions and location of the city create big problems. Here are some quotations:

Geographical conditions force people here to study, but the ones who study go to work in other cities. They say, "I spent half of my life here in the mountains, I don't want to spent the rest of it here." (Mstf2)

My kids did not have any problems, but hundreds of students are bused from their rural villages every morning to the city here and they complain. Sometimes we talk with these kids, they complain about the roads and how expensive it is

here. They don't like the city and that is why they don't like the school either. (Lvnt1)

There is a transportation rather than education problem here. I sent my kids at least 45 minutes earlier to school. And expenses are extra this affects education too. The transportation reduces kids' attention to the classes. (Lvnt7m)

Problems Arising from the Teachers

Some of the participants (17) said that teachers' circulation is too much and a few said that teachers' don't have lasting goals:

Inevitably, teachers who came here don't want to stay here more than few years. I don't think that there is a teacher coming here and having plans to stay more than 10 years. We as a private weekend preparatory institution when we look to bring some teachers outside from the city we also have hard times. We have to pay too high salaries so that we can bring good teachers here... In public school teachers are mostly novice and they get experienced here and then leave for big cities. Thus, the teachers here don't have permanent goals, and if they don't have lasting goals there are some problems occurring, we can say that. (Mlk1)

... the biggest problem for the city is the teachers who came here wanting to leave as soon as possible. Other than native teachers the rest make plans to leave. (Mlk9)

Here the good teachers leave when they get the chance. This interrupts the education. Living here is expensive, this is not attractive for teachers, and it is far away from everywhere. The best way to keep the teachers here is to give them some incentives. Housing is expensive here; the leaders should do something about it. (Mstf1)

... Main problem is teachers coming from outside don't stay here. Not even for one year the teacher cadre was full here. I know this because I am the superintendent here. Here the teachers are always in shortage. Teachers don't want to stay here because of the geographical factors... Teacher coming from outside and especially ones who go to villages get depressed and don't want to work. (Mstf2)

Some of the participants said, "Even the private preparatory schools cannot bring teachers, the director cannot bring the teachers he wants, there are too many substitute teachers here."

One fourth of the participants (14) said mainly the teachers are responsible:

I think the main problem facing education is that teachers don't do their job properly they do it according to their mood... Later after they pass the exam, you don't leave any desire in them to teach. After that you want these teachers to give quality education, but I don't think that these teachers can do that. (Yvz4)

For me the main problems in education are the teachers. Because, as the successful students are prepared by good and competent teachers, likewise the

unsuccessful students are prepared by incompetent, un-improving, and unprofessional teachers. (Yvz5)

... In school everything is between the students, the teachers and the principal. When the teacher closes the door, when he or she is alone with the students, the connection with the outside world is cut. After that the teacher may teach, or may sing, or may leave them alone. (Mstf4)

They don't give a way to young people. Constantly, the old cadre... and there is another way of cadre too, the politically motivated one... The teachers who are lazy go to public schools, and the ones who like working go to private schools... When you start working in public school you automatically get into resting position, there is nonsense talk going on in the teachers' room. When I was working in public school I didn't like sitting in the teachers' room, there was a question asking room, I preferred sitting there. I see the problem there. I don't say all of the public school teachers are like that. (Mlk4)

Teachers go in and out of their classes, but students cannot ask questions during the breaks. The teachers must help students. I can tell you a story of mine. My boy goes to his mathematics teacher to ask a question during the break. He says you can ask it in class. The boy asks in class, he solves two questions in front of the class and says the rest I can solve if you take private lessons from me. (Lvnt3)

One participant said the local teachers are incompetent and the ones who are not local are marginalized:

In school there is teacher incompetency. Teachers' competency is controversial. I think here teachers' competency is not in desired level. I think the local teachers don't dedicate themselves to teaching. They take care of their gardens, farms, and beehives. Economical problems of the teachers force local teachers to look for other options, like village farms, and this reduces their concentration on teaching. Improving their social and economical status can solve this problem. Teachers coming from other places also face the same economical problems. Additionally, they are marginalized. They also try to make sham marriage and get some health certificate to be able to move to other cities. (Mstf8)

Everybody is Responsible

One third of the participants (17) said they could not point to one specific reason for the unsuccessfulness of the schools here. They said everybody is responsible. One private preparatory school teacher said,

Of course, everybody has a share in this. Let's say teachers have an affect; generally they come here as new graduates. Quality teachers surely leave in some way. Administrators of course have too, but the teachers' influence is more. Students too, we don't guide them to study in a proper way. Let's say homework or other things are not done properly. Ha, of course, one of the biggest factors in this city everybody must study, all of the students take the

university entrance exam. Namely, vocational and science high school students take the same exam, because students from all kinds of schools take the exam, the achievement level in the exam looks low. (Mlk5)

Another teacher said:

Namely, we wouldn't face this problem if the education in elementary and middle school were successful. If the inspectors responsible for overseeing teachers were able to point to this failure, the teachers and administrators might be able to set in order themselves. And if we as parents were able to follow our kids in schools decently and focus on their educational life, would these educational problems be lived? In light of all these outcomes, I think the problems we face in education are product of all these factors. (Yvz3)

Students Going to Vocational Schools are Higher than They Should be

One fourth of the participants (15) said that the ratio of students attending to vocational high school in this city is high. An interesting finding is that mostly the teachers and private preparatory school administrators voiced this view:

Now, if we compare with the other cities, the ratio of students attending to vocational high school in this city is high. The ratio is near 70%, but if we look at the top cities in the rankings this ratio is adverse. Namely, vocational high school students' ratio is 40%. This is not to depreciate these students. But if we look at the curriculum in vocational high schools they have mainly vocational classes. When the situation is like this and questions in the exam are mostly general knowledge they inevitably lack behind. This lack is because you force students to take an exam for something that you didn't teach and they don't have chance of succeeding. Because of this the rankings of this city are pulled down in the nation wide university entrance exam. (Mlk1)

Determining factor in the university entrance exam are the math and science questions. Most of the students are from vocational high schools so they are unsuccessful in the exam and the ration of students attending weekend private preparatory schools is low. Students from vocational high school do not attend these preparatory schools so we have these consequences. (Mlk5)

Curriculum is Inconsistent

One third of the participants (18) said that the curriculum frequently changes and is not compatible with university entrance exam; elementary, middle, and high school education is not governed in a nationally organized way; and generally the national education system is responsible:

... in second grade tests started, tryout tests, leaflet tests, Second grade is too early for this... But I look and even in second grade the kid comes home and says, "Tomorrow will be a very bad day for me" I say what happened my son? "I have a tryout test" If the student goes into this phycology only in second grade you should understand the situation in education. This is not related to the school; maybe it is like this in the whole country. Everything is directed for the

exam. I say it as a private preparatory school teacher; we are in the wrong path here. (Mlk1)

I say in physics, the main reason for the failure is the curriculum in school, the content and the course hours are incomparable. This is very important, because grade 11 content is too much, but we have 2 hour of physics per week. Therefore, we don't have enough time to practice over the questions. Namely, when the students came here they even don't know the basic concepts. Therefore, we are teaching and solving problems over it.... There is another problem with the curriculum. They separated the curriculum in 2 hour and 4 hour physics. I don't know if you are aware of it. They say in the 2 hour curriculum don't teach the A concept, in the 4 hour curriculum teach the B concept. Now A concept is connected with B, so the student who doesn't see the A concept will have hard time understanding the B concept. We suffer from this, from the curriculum arrangements... However, in high school if the physics hours increase, for example English, German, Gym class, Drawing class is 2 hours and physics is 2 hours. Can physics and drawing class be the same? There must be some difference. When there is 4-hour English class there is 2-hour physics, I could not understand this. This seems foolish for me. You can learn English by going to summer courses, but physics is not like that. (Mlk3)

The education system in schools and the exam system are not consistent. But I wish there was no weekend preparatory school, and teachers in the public school do the entire job and we can work there too. They teach very little test techniques in public schools, but in the exam its only tests. Public schools and private weekend schools separate here, but we have to find the middle ground. (Mlk7)

The Teachers and Administrators Together are Responsible

One fourth of the participants (12) said that the teachers and administrators together are responsible:

I think the problems in education arise from the teachers and the administrators together. Because, can the administrator discuss the situation with teachers who don't do their job properly? I understand from the exam results that it is not discussed. (Yvz2)

There is administrative weakness in schools. If there is communication gap between teachers and school leaders it affects the students. My kid in middle school was always outstanding. He came to this high school and got the lowest grades so far. There are few teachers engaging with students, but generally I don't think they engage closely. There are no home works. I ask my kid, he says we did this and that. You did it but the teacher doesn't say do this and that. It is like university, I teach you got it or not it's your job to understand it. It needs control. Mathematics and science was good in middle school, but in high school they worsened, the other subjects are normal. (Mstf6)

My kid moved backwards knowledge wise. Their previous education level was high; they slowed here while solving problems. We saw this problem and told the school administrators. They said it is not possible they are in the best class

in the school. And we decided to move our kids to Ankara for their future. Now we are very pleased with the schools and with their education level. (Lvnt3)

One participant said that there is still violence going on in schools with a painful experience:

He was there till the last month of first grade. We were always watchful. My boy developed some reflex at the end of first semester. He was so scared. I met with the teacher, she said she doesn't have any problems, but there were odd behaviors. When I say you are writing this wrongly, he would guard himself. I learned from a friend that the teacher is beating my kid. The teacher was young and female. When I followed the issue, I got pressured from the deputy superintendent not to act on it. When I acted they said odd things, they said that my boy is hyperactive when he was not... There are 18 students in the class. I am involved with the school-family initiative. I am active. In this circumstance the teacher beat my kid. At the end of the year I got out my kid from this school and sent him to private school. I got out my kid from the mentality that said my kid is trouble and in private school he got championship from the Mathematics Olympiad. His grades are good. His psychology recovered, but it took a long time.... Along with the teacher I had problems with the school administrators too. After my complaint the principle that was very kind to me previous day, got distant. I was about to go to court, but got pressure from unbelievable places. The reason is that here it is a very small city, everyone knows everyone. I didn't go to court, but she beat my kid in the toilet. After this incident the teacher did not undergo any official investigation. I still remorse over this issue. Respectable people asked not to do it, the teacher begged. (Mstf3)

Problems Arising from the Students

Parents who were high school graduates or lower (9) said that students were responsible, even there was one parent who said that there was no need for his kid to study:

He usually goes to the office, he doesn't study, and he doesn't need to. If something happens to me the buses, houses and so many other things will be left to him. What will happen if he studies? He will work maximum for 2000 liras (slightly higher than minimum wage) for someone else. If he wants to work I can give him that money. I have only one son...You don't become a decent man with education; if that was the case all of the educated people should have been decent and sensible. He doesn't need to study, but for bus driving you need at least high school diploma. (Lvnt10)

Kids usually say why should I study, the daddy would buy a minibus and I can operate it, or I can get by with my father's interest money or property rent money. (Lvnt1)

Reading ratio is very low compared with the past. If we compare our times with right now, kids instead of reading they always solve test problems. They don't read anything, in their free time they either play PlayStation or look into Facebook, Twitter on the computer. Certainly, there is no I should pick up a book or read something, and improve my imagination. (Mlk4)

A bazaar seller said the problem “arises from the kids, why should it arise from others, they studied and reach the level they are now.” These views show that the socio-cultural status of parents plays an important role in students’ lives. Views expressed here come mostly from parents with low socio-cultural background (parents who have middle or high school diploma and are not very culturally active such as going to cinema or theater); these findings are consistent with the findings of others who claim that a family’s socio-cultural background is more important than its economic background (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Chevalier & Lanot, 2002).

Other Problems

Some participants said that living in the city is very expensive, successful students prefer to study high school in the big cities, the rural population is very high, the little towns around here are the problem, during the spring break students cannot stay in the public dormitories, parental pressure and their desire to push their student into the race, education leaders look only at the success ratio, they do not care about the teachers and students. Again, some participants said laboratories in school are not used, students do not study but somehow they pass the grades, the too much knowledge that they have to learn in a short time scare and dismay students, private and public school teachers do not cooperate. Also, one participant said that there is no book club where students can sit and read and students cannot find books they want. A few participants also said they deal with too much paper-work, the middle school grades are inflated, the old teachers should be forced to retire, and technology affects the reading habits.

Solutions to the Problems in the City

Participants said that to solve the educational problems in this city all the above-mentioned problems must be addressed and additionally suggested that cooperation and communication must increase among all the involved parties, teachers must be more involved, and successful teachers must be rewarded. Findings in this category are divided into three sub-categories and they are as follows:

Cooperation and Communication is Must

Half of the participants (21) said that schools, teachers, administrators, parents, and private preparatory course giving schools should work in cooperation:

... But again the biggest problem is communication. We should be in communication, namely with public school teachers, students’ parents, and among ourselves, if we want to achieve something. Namely I am in communication with my students’ parents, but unfortunately we are not in communication with the teachers in public schools. (Mlk10)

On the top, setting up good relationship among administrator, teacher, and parent could resolve the main problems. Because this dialogue we can put the kid’s achievement on the center and create discussion setting. Increasing the meetings in schools I think is important. (Yvz1)

I always establish dialogue with school administrators and their teachers for my kids and I saw the benefits. Because when the school leaders talked to me about

positive and negative situations we might have prevented wrong behaviors that might have been happened in the future. Besides, we learned about my big kid's behavioral problems from his teacher in school and we sat down with him and talked like a friend and prevented the behaviors that might count as negative. (Yvz4)

Later public school private preparatory school cooperation must be more active. Schools instead of guiding students to weekend preparatory courses should be in ideas sharing situations. At least there must be weekly meetings between them. School administrators at least should look at the test exam results conducted by us. What is the students' achievement, this must be parallel done. Achievement problems must be talked together and parents must be included too. They do it at the beginning of the school year and that is it. These meetings must be more often, at least monthly.... (Mlk2)

... But I say this certainly and certainly the education community must be in a dialogue, they should consult, no one should be stigmatized. There is no need for pride here. (Mlk9)

Teachers Must be More Involved

Half of the participants (19) said teachers must be knowledgeable in their area and more involved with their students, they should teach with joy and love, they should not insult and lash out at the students:

I desperately try to make students feel like they are valued. If a student doesn't come to school and to weekend preparatory course I most certainly ask for the reasons. I never skip. Namely, because the student necessarily says, "Ha the teacher is observing us." Whereby, if he doesn't have a real excuse, he comes to school. I saw the benefits of this. (Mlk3)

I think the main problems in education result from the teacher. Namely, I am a mathematics teacher. I teach mathematics and leave, but I must teach it in a way that students first of all should love me. If I don't teach it nicely, they won't like the math and me and maybe hate the math. First of all the kids should love me, and then my teaching style. We should teach with joy. (Mlk6)

I think the unions are not very effective in education. As a union it is hard to say that I saw a good job. My little kid's school is good. The school may be ordinary, but they are involved. They don't hurt them, they value them, and the kid loves her teachers. And this is enough for her to understand the lesson. (Mstf1)

The teachers must get rid off the arrogance. No arrogance suits any teacher. A teacher must be cheerful and good-humored. Parents must infuse reading to their kids; otherwise here the number of educated people will decrease. With the dam here there is no poor family left. Everyone sold their lands to the government, and some bought flat, some minibus... (Lvnt4)

I think we can overcome the problems here if we establish a joyful educational system. The students must go joyfully to school. The student must go to class, relax, and do some other cultural activity in school. I talk to some teachers they say things like “It is not livable here? How can you study in this city?” These sayings alienate students from the school, the teacher, and education. Firstly, we should give the incoming teachers training that will make them appreciate the city, social and cultural activities. (Lvnt5)

Successful Teachers must be Rewarded

Some participants (7) said that successful teachers must be rewarded:

To overcome the problems in education the communication between schools should grow stronger, in-service courses should increase, and the successful teachers must be rewarded and recognized. Because the teachers’ salaries are not in the desired level compared to other professions. If this situation improves, I think teachers will work more willingly. (Yvz5)

Moreover, hard-working and competent people must be employed in schools that get their students through entrance exams...First of all the superintendent must say this is my job and be in schools every morning. The school principle waits two hours in front of the door of the superintendent. The superintendent should show the necessary involvement, work in coordination with the schools in harmony, listen to problems, and equip them with technology. We have very successful teachers. The treatment of hard-working and not so teachers must be different. (Mstf6)

There must be a problem why we are in the last places in the university entrance exam. The biggest slice for this goes to the superintendent. They are indifferent and don’t see anything else than regulations. Another worry is the indifferentiation between successful and unsuccessful teachers. Local teachers think that I am here now I can rest. There is certainly no any sanction for that in the administration. And there is no any reward system for the hard-working teachers...Unions generally don’t deal with education problems. They are institutions that protect the lazy teachers. They only work for teacher rights without separating the hard working and not so ones. They never protest for increasing the work hours of teachers, but protest for salary rise, health issues, and other things. (Osmn5)

Another interesting finding is that 9 participants said that school buildings need improvement and 10 said that they are satisfied with the school buildings. Also some participants said teachers should help students love the math and science classes, schools should increase the problem solving study hours and provide discipline, teachers who cannot teach should move to other government institutions as civil servants, there must be a teacher qualification exam, university should support the schools, and schools of education must be better.

Discussion

One of the main findings from this study is that educational leaders' performance influence students' academic success in school and this is supported by Marks and Printy (2003) who said that the traditional perception of school leaders has changed with the reform movements in education. School leaders are expected to be the front-runners in changing and reforming the school and school administration can solve the school's real problems with only transformative and innovative approach. School leaders must be willing to share their responsibilities with others and must be willing to accept criticism for this kind of approach to succeed in schools. According to Marks and Printy (2003) only transformative and innovative management approach can help schools in creating effective learning environment and this study coming from a developing country supports this idea too.

The finding that one of the main problems in education are the teachers is supported by Rockoff (2003) and Goldhaber and Brewer (1996) who point out that teachers' academic background is linked with students' academic success. However, the findings that successful teachers must be rewarded, is in contrast with Rockoff's (2003) finding that increasing teachers' salary and improving their economic status did not show any improvement in students' success in school. This contrast is interesting because it shows that people in developing countries still think that pouring money into education and increasing teachers' salaries will improve the education, but findings from developed countries point out that there is no such correlation.

The findings about problems arising from parents in this study supports Gonzales et al. (1996) who argue that variables such as parents' educational level and family socio-economic status cannot alone be linked with students' academic success; other variables such as academic support from parents, siblings, and friends can play important role in students' success. Parents who were high school graduates or lower said that basically students were responsible, with one parent who said that there was no need for his kid to study. The finding that there was no need for kids to study also points out that people in this region got richer with the dam projects and correspondingly the importance of education declined. People in this city think that by running a minibus business they can earn easy money. This shows us that family's education level is very much related to students' achievement in schools and supports the findings of Sirin (2005) and White (1982). This finding also supports Chevalier and Lanot (2002) and Baquedano-Lopez et al. (2013) who found that family's socio-cultural background was more important than its economic background.

The finding that geographical conditions and location of the city create big problems supports the finding of Coleman (1988) and Dika and Singh (2002) who claim that location of the school indirectly provide social capital, which are necessary to success in school.

To overcome the problems in education in this city participants said that schools, teachers, administrators, parents, and private preparatory course giving schools should be in communication and work in cooperation. They also said that "Teachers must be knowledgeable in their area and be more involved with their students, they should teach with joy and love, they shouldn't insult and lash out at the students." These views support Karakas' (2013) findings.

Overall, the findings basically go in parallel with research findings mentioned in the introductory section of this paper and that problems in education are the same for this city as it is in the world. However, one interesting finding is that city location plays an important role in students' academic achievement, living in a city where students have an access to cinemas and theaters, have a wide playground area where they can play soccer or basketball, or can easily go to their schools, seems important.

Some of the recommendations of this study were implemented by the leaders, such as changing the superintended of the city and increasing communication and cooperation among all the people involved in education. Also, government improved the infrastructure in the city by opening up a 5 km long tunnel under the mountains that helped in easy access to the big cities and the sea side. Another study should be conducted to see whether these improvements helped the situation.

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APPENDIX

Semi-structured interview questions

1. Where did you graduate?
2. How many years have you been working in your workplace?
3. Did you live or work in any other city?
4. How many years you have been living in this city?
5. Do you have computer and Internet connection at home?
6. Do you have children going to school?
 - a. Which school are they going to?
 - b. Which grade are they in?
 - c. How do your children study at home?
 - d. Do you have a separate study room, Internet; PlayStations and how they use them?
 - e. What is your satisfaction level with their school (teacher, director, school's physical facilities, peer environment)?
7. Could you please share your problems in education and with the schools?
 - a. In which level in education you are facing with problems?
 - b. From where are the main problems in education coming (administrator, teacher, parent, students and etc.)
8. How would you describe your relationship with schools?
9. How would you assess your support and collaboration with education here?
10. How can we overcome the problems in education in this city?
11. What kind of additional thoughts do you have?

Additional probing questions such as:

Could you please explain and elaborate more on this?

What are you trying to say here?

How did this happen?

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