



Exploring school exclusion through the perspective of child labourers living in Sultanbeyli, on the periphery of Istanbul, Turkey



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ABSTRACT

This study employs a socio-ecological perspective to explore the impact of the community, school environment and personal circumstances of young people living in the squatter district of Sultanbeyli in Istanbul, Turkey, who have been excluded from school and who are working in very difficult conditions. The views explored in this paper are derived from semi-structured interviews that covered the reasons for their exclusion. The findings show that the elimination of poverty and the provision of universal education are linked and that one cannot be achieved without the other. The impact of poverty on the processes of school exclusion requires greater recognition, because it helps to perpetuate an intergenerational cycle of social and educational disadvantage. In the case of these young people from Sultanbeyli, the school system has failed to contribute to their inclusion; instead, it has further increased their marginal, disadvantaged position by unintentionally pushing them into the worst forms of child labour and criminality.

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1. Introduction

There has been progress in helping children in developing countries to access basic education; however, sustained educational access remains problematic in the poorest regions of the world (Dunne and Ananga, 2013), and this contravenes the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in multiple ways (Hemphill and Schneider, 2013).

This study employs a socio-ecological perspective (Miller, 2010; Slaughter-Defoe et al., 1990; Waters et al., 2009; Thomas, 2001) to discuss the circumstances of the community, school environment and personal lives of the excluded students living in Sultanbeyli, (Turkey) who participated in the study.

Sultanbeyli is a squatter district in Istanbul and is a typical 'third-world settlement', with low levels of educational attainment, high levels of fertility and a strikingly low level of female participation in economic activities (Pınarcıoğlu and Işık, 2008).

In this study, the factors of vulnerability in the phenomenon of school exclusion will be explored, in an attempt to gain insights

into the unique perspectives of 20 youngsters aged 15–18 years who have been excluded from school and have gone into workplaces with very difficult conditions. They all attend the vocational training centre in Sultanbeyli once a week and work in hazardous conditions for the rest of the week. They have to work for long hours and are paid very little; they may be exposed to high temperatures, chemical hazards and a high risk of accidents caused by cuts and burns.

The study utilises the qualitative method, as opposed to starting with a hypothesis, so that the investigation is not restricted to predetermined concepts and the significance of concepts is not prejudged. This paper explores the views of the 20 young people as derived from semi-structured interviews, which covered their school experiences leading to their exclusion. Gersch and Nolan (1994) argue that, in order to understand the effects of exclusion, the child's view needs to be elicited and explored; too often, however, the viewpoint of students remains unheard (Stumpers et al., 2005). In addition, Rudduck et al. (1996) suggest that the least effective learners are most likely to be able to highlight aspects of the systems that constrain commitment and progress; these are the voices least likely to be heard and yet they should be the most important.

Many schools have adopted relational approaches to taking account of the social context; however, such approaches and their proponents have been criticised for not examining the school

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context in its entirety and the student experience within this context (Stumpers et al., 2005). The current research sought to achieve a critical exploration of young people's experiences within the context of their school.

1.1. Wider context: the district of Sultanbeyli

Among the settlements in Turkey, Sultanbeyli is a well-documented example of the urbanisation process. It was during their surveys of Sultanbeyli in the 1990s that Oğuz Işık and Melih Pınarcıoğlu developed the concept of 'poverty in turn', which refers to the financial enrichment of the residents of the former generations through collecting rent while new residents take over the positions of poverty (Işık and Pınarcıoğlu, 2013). During the 1980s and 1990s, the district was strongly affected by the impacts of changes in the Turkish economy, from the first wave of neoliberal globalisation to the social pressures of the conflicts in the south-east region of the country. Such studies on the relationship between urbanisation and poverty in Sultanbeyli have not been followed by new fieldwork. However, it is noticeable that poverty and its concomitant problems in the district, as well as in the whole country, increased and became permanent from the late 1990s onwards. This was after the second neoliberal wave, in which treaties imposed by international finance and trade corporations played a distinctive role in yoking nation-states economically, and simultaneously gave wild capitalism an appearance of regularity (Işık, 2010). In a more recent article, Işık and Pınarcıoğlu state that in the 2000s the dynamics of poverty conditions changed, in ways that weakened informal cooperation networks, and that now there exists a new urban poor who are excluded from every kind of solidarity practice, and thus any change in their class positions is impossible (Pınarcıoğlu and Işık, 2008).

The problems of the children and young people covered in this study cannot be directly connected to the conditions imposed by globalisation; however, the nexus seems to be evident between these problems and an increase in the imbalance of the distribution of income, i.e. a decline in the life opportunities of the poor (Senses, 2013). Edmonds and Pavcnik (2005) argue that low income, poverty and poor educational institutions are the driving forces behind the prevalence of child labour worldwide. The social, economic and cultural structure of Sultanbeyli contains many risks for the psycho-social development of children. Most of the young people living there in relative poverty have significant difficulties in accessing education, transportation, the health system, social services and other material resources; their participation in social, sporting and intellectual activities is low, and they are deprived of housing opportunities. The imposition of flexible production, part-time employment and neoliberal economic structures renders inter-class and inter-identity differences more apparent and has engendered new poverty sufferers who are unlikely to integrate into the socio-economic system and are at risk of social exclusion and marginalisation (Bugra and Keyder, 2003). Although a great deal of the previous literature has explored the ways in which social class affects parental engagement in educational processes, there has been surprisingly little specific discussion on the way in which social class shapes the parent-professional interaction that occurs in the processes of school exclusion. These processes are complex, and those parents who become involved in them should negotiate for greater recognition of the impact of social class on parent-professional interaction and how this can help to perpetuate an intergenerational cycle of social and educational disadvantage (Gazeley, 2012).

The participants of our study are young people who are excluded from the regular education system, trying to acquire their high school grades and attending a vocational course at the same

time. One of the distinguishing features of these young people is their common belief, generally inherited from their families, in the sufficiency and permanency of crafts and artisanship as a way of subsistence. This belief finds its expression in the saying *altın bilezik* ('golden bracelet').¹ Thus, our interviewees are not individuals exploited directly by transnational companies, who benefit the most from neoliberal policies, or their local partners. On the contrary, their inhumanly long working hours and levels of income explicitly reveal that they have their own share in the prevailing conditions of impoverishment. As is the case with the working youth in Turkey in general (Ozdemir and Yücesan Özdemir, 2005; Yıldız, 2006), they are excluded from any social security measures and work for very low salaries in precarious conditions, including neglect and abuse. Hoping to have an occupation and a secure job in the future, young people carry a heavy burden on their shoulders of responsibility to provide or support their families who are living in poverty conditions, and this often costs them in physical and psycho-social maldevelopment. According to the 2012 surveys of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), 34.3% of the working children in the 15–17 age range continue to receive education at the same time (TUIK, 2012).

Unfortunately, no systematic fieldwork has hitherto been conducted to assess the magnitude of, and the damage done by, the neoliberal attack on the public education system. The problem has been studied only at the level of articles and compilations and without any extensive comparisons of the specific situation of Turkey with that of other nation-states (İnal and Akkaymak (Eds.), 2012; Oğuz and Yakar (Eds.) 2007; Sayılan, 2006; Sentürk, 2010). The most plausible argument of neoliberal policy-makers is that the privatisation of the secondary and higher education systems (which are already dominated by the ruling classes and high status groups all over the world) and the allocation of public resources to the primary education system would diminish the exploitation of the relevant institutions by high income groups and create a relatively egalitarian basis for education in general (Sayılan, 2006). Yet even if we leave aside the intention of producing an unqualified labour force available to respond to the demands of capital, one can simply predict that such an allegedly well-intentioned strategy would, on all levels, transform quality education from being a social right for all to an ordinary commodity, if not a privilege only for the rich. Indeed, a casual look at the implementation of neoliberal education policies in Turkey verifies that projection: Fatma Gök's analysis of the school system reveals that, because of the ongoing privatisations in the field, neither teachers sufficient in quantity and quality nor necessary educational material can be adequately provided for the public education system (Gök, 2004). An examination of the statistical bulletins published by the Ministry of Education also clearly indicates the polarisation of quality in education between the public and private sectors: at both primary and secondary levels in private schools the average number of students per classroom hovers around 15, while the corresponding number in public schools amounts to approximately 45. In a district like Sultanbeyli, relatively poor and distant from the metropolitan centre, the figures show the situation to be all the more dramatic: according to data from the year 2012, there are 71 students per classroom in public primary schools in Sultanbeyli, and 14 per classroom in private ones. In the secondary education system it is reported that the numbers appear as 53–14 (Aras, 2012).

According to a report released by an educational labour union, there has been a decline in student attendance in high schools since the commencement in the 2011–2012 school year of the

¹ A source which, once acquired, never loses its value, as is the case with gold in the view of mankind.

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