

# **The reproduction of social inequality through education: The case of vocational high schools in Turkey**

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## **Abstract**

*The main purpose of this qualitative-phenomenological study is to examine vocational high schools in Turkey within the context of social inequality. Using criterion sampling technique, fourteen teachers working in vocational high schools participated in a semi-structured interview. The obtained data were analyzed through the descriptive analysis method. The findings revealed that vocational high schools which have mostly students from low socio-economic background and an inferior social status can not function effectively and fail to enable the students to have jobs in a short time. It was also found out that the division of high schools as academic and vocational was accepted by almost half of the participants as a required condition and most of the teachers associated the current problems regarding vocational high schools with students' incompetences, indifferences, problematic behaviours, etc. Thus, they were found to be inclined to ignore the inequalities arising from the nature of class differences. In this sense, it can be argued that vocational education and vocational high schools reproduce existing social inequalities with socio-economic backgrounds of the students, low social status of these schools, division of schools as vocational and academic and teachers' discourses.*

**Keywords:** *vocational high school, vocational education, social inequality*

## **Introduction**

*People make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please ..., but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past...  
Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

People live in a society to meet their mutual needs. The individuals, who meet their basic needs, can improve their potentials and the opportunities of living in a society. It is important for both the individual and the society to unearth and fulfill human potentials. Education, which is based on the improving of this potential, plays an important role in the reproduction of economic and ideological relations which are necessary to maintain the social life in a society. Within this context, education is of increasing importance to ensure the continuity, reproduction, legitimacy of the economic system and the reproduction of the dominant social culture (Pinar, 2017; Apple, 1982).

We live in a world dominated by capitalism. As the educational practices in capitalist societies are based on the economic relations (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), education and training of the workforce have not been given as much importance as today in any period of capitalism (Ashton and Green, 1999). In this sense, attempts aiming to increase the quality and quantity of vocational training in order to train the labor force needed by the economy have increased. Global organizations such as the European Union (EU), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), World Bank and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have taken various initiatives to support vocational education (VE).

Historically, VE has been attributed with economic functions such as reducing youth unemployment and increasing local competition (Hyslop-Margison, 2000) and has been considered as an important solution in the struggle against unemployment, job dissatisfaction and other economic problems (Kantor, 1986, 423). In time, the aim of VE has been transformed to provide economic growth and increase competition (Comyn and Barnaart, 2010). Gradually over time, in line with the evolution and needs of capitalism, it has come to the fore to “take capitalist’s interest for the sake of the capital accumulation”(Aksoy, 2015: 3) and thus aimed to provide students with the skills required by the labor market, to increase labor force participation and to strengthen relations with the labor market. This market-based economic perspective that dominates vocational training is also reflected in its programs as well and the programs have been structured within the framework of training workforce who have the skills and attitudes appropriate to the labor market, job requirements and employer needs (Down, 2006). However, VE is not a neutral area, which is free of the politics due to its responsibility of raising the personnel required by the labor market (Bulut, 2010:245; Ünal, Kurul and Aksoy, 2005);rather it is a topic that includes more ethical and political questions about the education of students, the type of society in which they will live, etc (DeFalco, 2010). In fact, VE can not be considered as independent of the realities of class and unequal power relations (Hyslop-Margison, 1999; Emirgil, 2009). Within this context, vocational high schools (VHSs) which “provide students with no other alternative than adopting the goal of becoming a part of “intermediary manpower” and expect students to take part in an effort to create a future “against themselves are an issue of class (Aksoy, 2015: 12) Especially considering that educational institutions legitimize social inequalities and serve as a tool in the production of the existing social structure (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Willis, 1977), VE and VHSs in which the children of poor and disadvantaged families are educated and are thought to limit the students economically, socially and culturally (Hyslop-Margison, 2000;

Dewey, 1916; Sultana, 1995) should be discussed within the context of reproduction of social and educational inequality.

*The ideals of education, whether men are taught to teach or plow, to weave or to write, must not be allowed to sink into sordid utilitarianism. Education must keep broad ideals before it, and never forget that it is dealing with Souls and not with Dollars"*

*Du Bois (1902: 82; Cited by Dotts, 2015)*

### **Vocational Education within the Concept of Social Inequality**

The issue of equality which has been one of the core concerns of social sciences has always been on the agenda of philosophers, sociologists and educational researchers. Accordingly, various viewpoints regarding its definition, reason for existence and necessity have been argued. Although there is not a certain definition of the concept, what is most evident with it is that it is about the inequality of outcomes and opportunities across four distinct social levels as individuals, groups, organizations and institutions (Turner, 2006: 286).

Social inequality which can be described as differences establishing unequal relations between people from rights, opportunities, rewards to privileges" (Grabb, 1990:4) is often argued to arise mostly as a result of unequal distribution of income, wealth and power (Macionis, 2012). However, the source of income in addition to the amount has utmost importance for the existence of inequality (Turner, 2006) and the intergenerational transmission of class inequalities is based on both material resources and social/cultural assets ( Sullivan, Ketende and Joshi, 2013). Bourdieu (1977) argues that economic capital, consisting of material goods such as property, wealth and input, is important but he thinks this is a partial share of understanding the class. He describes four forms of "capital" that characterize class position, but according to him, economic capital is the only

valid form and the others are "cultural", "symbolic" and "social" forms. Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu, 1985: 51; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 119) . Similarly Coleman (1994: 300) defines social capital as the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organisation and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person. In this regard, he argues that social capital plays important roles in the creation of human capital of the rising generation (Coleman, 1988: 109).

Cultural capital is an informal academic standard, a class attribute, a basis for social selection, and a resource for power which is salient as an indicator/basis of class position (Bourdieu, 1985:51). According to Bourdieu, individuals increasingly distinguish themselves from others, not based on economic factors, but on the cultural capital, which includes education, appreciation of art, consumption and spare time activities (Giddens, 2012) and unequal distribution of cultural capital among social classes underlies the inequalities in the society( Bourdieu, 1985). Thus the theory of cultural capital has a large influence on such discourses as social class, class stratification, social origin, social status and social reproduction. Within the context of cultural capital, people's participation in social and cultural life varies in accordance with their social status (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Notten, Lancee, Werfhorst and Ganzeboom, 2014). Cultural participation plays an important role in transferring social and educational inequality to the next generations (De Graaf, Graaf, Kraaykamp, 2000). The family's social class and cultural capital they transmit to children have a determining impact on the educational success and experiences of their children (Kayaalp, 2002; Lareau, 2015). In this sense, children coming to school with limited cultural capital from the lower social stratum and working class are

considered to be more disadvantaged in terms of their social origins and linguistic competence than children from middle and upper classes. While children from upper-middle classes have the necessary social and cultural cues at the beginning of their educational experiences, the children from working or lower social stratum acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and cultural competencies later; however, they can never reach their upper and middle class peers (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Ünal and Özsoy, 1999 ). Thus, it is considered that social inequalities, the children from disadvantaged groups are exposed to during their school education, can form the basis for future disadvantages (Freitag and Schlicht, 2009).

VE policies which are asserted to help the social and class inequalities to maintain themselves by contributing to the reproduction of class structure (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Kantor, 1986) come into prominence as they provide the basis for an educational order which includes “inferior rewards, undesirable social definition and increasing intrinsic meaningless of work resulting with a location at the bottom of a class society” (Willis, 1977:1). Therefore, vocational schools where the children of disadvantaged families generally attend and are mostly deemed to secondary areas in “labor market, with a secondary identity (Aksoy, 2015) must be taken into consideration within the context of social inequalities. According to Sultana (1995: 212) vocational schooling is the subject of three important ideological criticisms: One of these criticisms is about vocational schooling’s restricting students with a small number of jobs and causing them to be obliged to the occupational paths which are usually not highly rewarding . Hyslop-Margison (2000) asserts that schooling, VE in that sense, preparing certain students to fill lower status positions legitimates the class stratification and the existing social inequality. What is more, the specialization that the students expose in the early years of their lives is supposed to prevent them from acquiring a complete general education. With respect to this, it is

expected that the students who have the chance (!) of early specialization are deprived of the chances to “have more marketable skills as ‘specialists’, ‘technicians’, ‘white-collar’ employees’ or ‘civil servants’”(Grabb, 1990: 56) The last criticism of vocational schooling is that it causes the students to accept their destiny in a tiered and segmented labour market “(Feinberg and Horowitz 1990; as cited in Sultana, 1995 ). Dewey (1916: 317) emphasized this aspect of VE as well and argued that “with the vocational schooling system which takes its stand upon a dogma of social predestination, . . .some are to continue to be wage earners under economic conditions like the present...”

### **Vocational Education and Vocational High Schools in Turkey**

The aim of secondary education in Turkey is determined to prepare students for higher education, profession, life and work areas by giving them a common general culture at secondary level (MoNE, 2016a). Accordingly, secondary schools are divided into two types of high schools: academic high schools (AHSs) providing academic education and VHSs providing VE. While the aim of AHSs is to prepare students for a higher education program; the aim of VHSs is to prepare students for a certain profession and provide semi-skilled workers needed by the society. There are three main types of AHSs in Turkey: Science high schools, social sciences high schools and Anatolian high schools. Within the scope of VHSs, there are five common school types: Health, trade, tourism, girls’ and industrial VHSs. While science, social sciences, some Anatolian high schools and Anatolian technical programs of VHSs accept students according to the results of a central exam; some Anatolian high schools and all of VHSs accept students not based on any examination but on their residential address, the closest school to their residence (MoNE, 2016b).

Vocational education and training (VET) in Turkey is carried out in VHSs and vocational (apprenticeship) training centers. Two different program types called

Anatolian vocational and Anatolian technical are offered in VHSs. The Anatolian technical programme is more academic based and it aims to direct the students to higher education and enable the vocational and technical higher education to have more qualified human resources. The students in this programme do 40 days internship during summer holidays of 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades; so they continue their school education during academic year. On the other hand, Anatolian vocational programme is more practical based and it aims to train qualified semi-skilled workers rather than provide the students with higher education. The students in this programme do 10 months of workplace training and come to school just two days per week in their last school year. As another setting which VE is carried out in Turkey, vocational (apprenticeship) training centers aim to give the students the opportunity to improve their skills in real work atmosphere and prepare them for employment without the requirement to take vocational courses (Bulut, 2010). The students in these centers are given theoretical education at school once a week and they are given vocational education at work on other days. They are taken for skill exams at the end of each academic year starting from the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and they are given certificate of mastery if they are successful at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Özer, 2018).

The improvement of VE has been a major issue since the foundation of Turkish Republic in order to enable the education to be more practical and feasible for the economic requirements of the country (Kayaalp, 2002). After 1960s when Turkey entered the planned development process, the importance of VE has been emphasized in almost all development plans in order to implement a higher schooling ratio than general secondary education and achieve the numerical targets of 65 % (for VHSs) to 45 % (for AHSs) (Aksoy, 2015). Especially since 2000s, as a result of the attempts to harmonise the VE with European Union and empower it (Özer, 2018), the issue of VE was given high priority and the education system has been reshaped with the education policies, laws and



regulations established in order to train the workforce needed by the economy in accordance with the objectives of development programs (Ünal and Özsoy, 1999). Accordingly, a number of EU-led government-based initiatives and practices such as the project of ‘Strengthening Vocational Education and Training System’ (SVET), the protocol of ‘Vocational Education is the Issue of Our Country’ and “Strengthening of Vocational and Technical Education in Organized Industrial Zones” have been initiated so that the economy can have qualified workforce, advanced technology capacity and easy adaptation to changing conditions (DPT, 2007: 72). In this respect, increasing the weight of VE and spreading VHSs have been among the priorities of both Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and some other stakeholders of education (ERI, 2012).

Nevertheless, it worths emphasizing that these priorities have been left behind and VHSs have become the schools which are actually not preferred so much but have to be attended today. In this regard, the number of students studying in VHSs and the demand for these schools have decreased steadily especially since the last four years. While the number of students enrolled VHSs was 2.119 736 in 2014-2015 academic year, it was found as 1.987 282 during 2017-2018 in academic year (MoNE, 2018). The success rates of VHSs are considered to be effective in this decrease. In fact, it has been revealed in some researches that the VHSs’ students took the last place in the university entrance exams and the success rate of many VHSs has been far behind the students studying in Anatolian high schools and especially science high schools (Anıl, 2009; Çelen, Çelik and Seferoğlu, 2011; Fındık and Kavak, 2013). In addition, the VHSs’ students scored lower in all areas (mathematics, science, reading) than students from other high schools in PISA (2006, 2009, 2012, 2015) exams (Atik, 2017). Furthermore, students studying in VHSs were found to have the highest rates in terms of repetition, absenteeism and dropout in various researches (Bülbül, 2014; Demir, 2017; ERI, 2010; MoNE, 2017; Toker Gökçe and Bülbül, 2014). One

reason that may be associated with the failure, absenteeism and dropout rates of the students studying at VHSs and vocational (apprenticeship) training centers is the workplace training and apprenticeship practices. As it is already known, the students in Anatolian technical program do 40 days internship during summer holiday and the students in Anatolian vocational programme do 10 months of workplace training in their last school year. Similarly, the students in vocational (apprenticeship) training centers do workplace training 4 days a week. Thus it is possible to argue that students especially in the vocational programme and workplace training centers spend most of their time outside school and this causes them to be estranged from school in the form of absenteeism and even dropout. Considering that these students who have also disadvantageous in terms of socio-economic and cultural background mostly spend this time in their last school year, when they also have to attend university entrance exam, their failure in university entrance exam becomes quite clear. Another subject of criticism regarding the students studying at VHSs and vocational (apprenticeship) training centers is the employment and exploitation of students as “unskilled labor” (Bulut, 2010). In this sense, Aksoy (2015) argues that the students at VHSs and vocational training centers are deprived of alternatives that students studying in other schools have and while they meet the expectations of enterprises especially in skills training process; their labor is exploited and they are taught to obey. Thus, it can be inferred that with both their socio-economic status and disadvantageous status that they have while preparing for the exam and exploitation of their labor, they are deprived of many opportunities that their peers have and they are exposed to different forms of inequality. Considering all these disadvantages VHSs’ students have, VHSs have been the subject of criticism in several studies (Aksoy, 2015; Demir, 2017; Bülbül, 2014; ERI, 2010; Toker Gökçe and Bülbül, 2014; Atmaca, 2019; Bulut, 2010; Emirgil, 2009; Gündüz and Beşoluk, 2008; Kayaalp, 2002; Pınar, 2017).

However, the initiatives to improve VE have showed a tendency to ignore the criticisms directed to VE and the role it plays in the reproduction of social classes, and its function of legitimizing inequalities in social structure ( Egitim Sen, 2004; Aksoy, 2005, Aksoy, 2011; Aksoy, 2013; Aksoy, 2015) and VE has been approached mostly from the perspective of labor, employment, productivity and competition (Çakır, 2014; Çelik, 2013; Demirer, 2018; Gür, 2011).

All things considered, the importance of studies that focus on VHSs with a perspective focusing on the issues of equality and class dimension is clear and this study is expected to contribute to the literature in this respect. Accordingly, the main purpose of this study is to examine VE and VHSs within the context of social inequality according to the opinions of teachers working at VHSs. Based on this aim, it is attempted to answer the following questions :

1. What do teachers think about the aims and functions of VHSs? At what level do these schools achieve their aims and functions?
2. What do the teachers think about the social status of VHSs?
3. What do the teachers think about the socioeconomic levels of students in VHSs? How do socioeconomic levels of these students affect their future lives, economic, cultural and social competences?
4. What do the teachers think about the division of high schools as AHSs and VHSs in Turkey? How does this division affect students in VHSs?

### **Research Context**

Turgutlu is a district in the city of Manisa which is one of the industrialized cities in Turkey and it is next to İzmir, the third biggest city of Turkey. The district stands out especially in businesses such as agriculture and livestock and there are several business firms and factories based on agriculture. Also, it is the largest production district in terms of soil production and it has a developed

infrastructure for machinery and manufacturing industry . There is one organized industrial zone in Turgutlu and there are various industrial enterprises both in Manisa and İzmir. The district has a powerful industry and considered a work centre by nearby towns. So, it attracts many immigrants and its population is increasing rapidly making it the third biggest district of Manisa. There are 33 primary; 26 secondary and 14 high schools in Turgutlu and 7 of these high schools are VHSs. As for the types of these VHSs, there are 2 girls VHSs, 2 industry VHSs, 1 health VHS, 1 trade VHS and there is 1 vocational (apprenticeship) training center.

### **Methodology**

In this study, phenomenology design, which is widely accepted in such disciplines as philosophy, psychology, and education was used (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology which focuses on a concept or phenomenon rather than the life of an individual (Anderson and Spencer, 2002) is a qualitative research design which attempts to explain how the individuals experience a phenomenon such as an event, case, concept, emotion, etc. (Christensen, Johnson and Turner, 2014). In other words, the phenomenological design aims to understand the meaning, structure and essence of one or more people's experience of a phenomenon and to make this experience more visible (Patton, 2014). Accordingly, in this study the phenomenological design was preferred to reveal the situations that teachers experienced in VHSs.

### **Participants**

As the participants of a phenomenological study need to be multiple individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2007:128 ), criterion sampling technique is used in this study. Criterion sampling is a kind of purposeful sampling of cases on preconceived criteria (Sandelowski, 2000: 248). The criteria in that kind of sampling technique can either be created by the

researcher or a list of criteria can be used. (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). Thus, working in at least two different types of VHSs, having at least five years of experience in a VHS and being volunteer to participate in the study were determined as the criteria to be used in selecting participants. In this sense, fourteen teachers who have been working in the town of Turgutlu in Manisa province and volunteers to participate in the study were chosen. The information regarding the participants are given in the following table:

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants

Participants	Gender	School type	Subject area	Years of experience
P1	Male	Industry VHS	Maths	8
P2	Female	Health VHS	Vocation	21
P3	Male	Girls' VHS	Chemistry	18
P4	Female	Girls' VHS	Vocation	5
P5	Female	Girls' VHS	History	8
P6	Female	Girls' VHS	Vocation	10
P7	Male	Trade VHS	Vocation	24
P8	Female	Trade VHS	English	5
P9	Male	Trade VHS	History	19
P10	Male	Trade VHS	Vocation	10
P11	Female	Industry VHS	Maths	5
P12	Female	Health VHS	Vocation	31
P13	Male	Industry VHS	Vocation	12
P14	Male	Health VHS	Literature	11

### Data Collection Instrument

In order to collect data semi-structured “VHSs Interview Form” was developed by the researchers. This form consisted of personal questions such as gender,

subject areas, school type and four main questions and probe questions aiming to examine the VHSs within the context of social inequality. The interview form was examined by two experts working in a faculty of education in Turkey and according to expert opinions; the form provided the necessary requirements. Mock interviews were carried out with three teachers working at VHSs to determine the possible problems related to the clarity of questions, time, etc. and necessary corrections were done accordingly.

### **Data collection**

Ethical issues have been given utmost importance at all stages of this study. In order to conduct the interviews, permission was obtained from the school principals and the participants were selected from volunteer teachers. The participants were assured that the data collected would not be used for purposes other than the research purpose. As data collection instrument, a semi-structured interview form was used and data were collected through individual interviews as individual interviewing allows the researcher to explore personal and social issues in more detail (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006) and provides a positive atmosphere making the interviewees feel more comfortable (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Most of the interviews (n:11) were recorded by a tape recorder, and some (n:4) were written when the teachers did not wish that their voice to be recorded on tape. The interviews lasted approximately 25-35 minutes.

### **Data analysis**

For the data analysis of the interviews, audio-taped recordings and written texts were transcribed. As a data analysis technique, descriptive analysis was used. Descriptive analysis includes summarizing and interpreting of qualitative data according to predetermined themes (Ekiz, 2009; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). The main purpose of descriptive analysis is to present the findings to the reader in a summarized and interpreted form. In descriptive analysis, direct quotations are

often referred to reflect the views of the participants in a striking manner (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005). In this regard, the answers given to the research questions in this study were collected under each question title and each question was accepted as a theme. The expressions that could be used as direct citations were identified and conferred in associated parts in findings. While giving direct citations, each participant was coded like : P1, P2, P3,...etc.

In order to promote the validity and reliability of the research, firstly an influential conceptual framework was organized and experts were consulted to give their opinions to form the interview questions. Then, pilot interviews were carried out to promote the clarity and comprehensibility of the interview questions and some alterations were done accordingly. Also, so as to ensure the reliability of the research, descriptions about the limits, methodology, the working group, data collection and analysis process were all expressed in detail. Furthermore, the data were analysed by the two researchers independently and the interpretations were discussed in order to ensure the compromise and conformity.

## **Findings**

This section presents the findings of the study and their subsequent analysis. The findings are organised into four categories: objectives and functions of VHSs, social status of VHSs, socioeconomic status of VHSs, division of high schools as academic and vocational.

### **1. Objectives and Functions of VHSs**

In this theme, the participants' views about the objectives and functions of VHSs and whether they achieve their aims or not are presented. In this regard, it was revealed that all of the participants defined the objective of VHSs is to train qualified semi-skilled workers for the business world and enable the students, especially the poor and clever ones, to have jobs in a short time. However, almost

all of the participants (f:13) asserted that VHSs can not function as effectively as expected and most of the graduates can not find jobs and have a job. In this sense, the participants referred to various factors such as the incompetency, aimlessness of the students studying in these schools and the inability of these schools to prepare the students for both profession and university. The participants' related opinions are as following:

“The aim of these schools is to train qualified semi-skilled workforce but they can not function effectively. They lack the necessary equipments for that. The students are obliged to study here as they have no other options. They can not go to academic schools as their grades are very low and they are coming to these schools compulsorily. Thus, their academic success is quite low.” (P5)

“Actually, its aim must be to prepare students for a profession and to place them in a job but it serves to direct students to university at the moment. However, it neither prepares for university, nor enables them to have a job. Thus, it does not function effectively and fulfill its aim”. (P4)

Taking the views of the participants in this regard, it can be argued that VE can neither achieve its purpose of training intermediate manpower nor prepare students for university. Once the low success rates of VHSs students in university entrance exams (Anıl, 2009; Çelen, Çelik and Seferoğlu, 2011; Fındık and Kavak, 2013; MoNE, 2018) and employment status of the graduates are considered, the situation will become clearer. In fact, it was revealed in various studies that unemployment and the long-term unemployment rate is at the highest level among the VE graduates and a great majority of the graduates could not work in any type of jobs or work with minimum wages or under minimum wage outside their field of education (Aksoy, 2015; ERI, 2012; Hepkul, 2014; MoNE, 2017; Taşçı and Tansel, 2005; Uçar and Özerbaş, 2013).



As for the reasons, some participants argued that VHSs can not function because the education provided in these schools do not meet the demands of the market and the graduates become unemployed. One participant described this situation like this (P9):

“Its aim is to ensure the students to have a job in a short time but it can not achieve its functions 70 %, because there are problems in meeting the demands of the market and in finding jobs for the graduates.

Besides not meeting the demands of the market it was also stated that an education below the expectations of the market is provided and the current technology at VHSs is outdated. One participant expressed this situation like this (P13):

“It does not function as expected, it fails. We are providing training below the market demands. It does not keep up with the techniques applied in labour market. We fall behind the labour market. The workers in the labor market are far beyond in terms of technology.

Furthermore, some participants referred to the locations which VHSs and the departments in those schools were established and argued that these schools were established without taking environmental conditions into account and effective planning; thus it is not relevant to expect them to be functional. This situation is explained by a participant like this (P14):

Its being functional or not depends on its location. For example, it functions effectively here. Some of them are established in locations which there are no industrial enterprises. Once the graduates can not find jobs, they are of no use.

In parallel with the participants’ opinions about the aims of VE, MoNE (2018:21) identifies the aim of VE as “to train a productive and competent workforce having

national and international professional qualifications and values in cooperation with social and economic sectors. However, corresponding to the views of participants, it is inferred that VE, VHSs in this regard, can not achieve its aims and functions due to the such factors as not meeting the labor market demands, locations of VHSs and the technology used in VHSs. Although it is argued that once the VHSs were established and professional fields in these schools were determined, factors such as needs of the region and whether the graduates could be employed or not were taken into account (EYUDER, 2018), it is revealed from the statements of participants that the graduates can not find jobs in their regions, even in other regions or work in other jobs with minimum or under minimum wages. This was also confirmed with various studies in the literature (EARGED, 2006; ERI, 2012; Hepkul, 2014; MoNE, 2017; Taşçı and Tansel, 2005; Uçar and Özerbaş, 2013). Within this context, EYUDER (2018) identified that in order to improve and enlarge VE, VHSs were attempted to be established to almost everywhere and the amount of supply exceeded the employment. However as a result of the change of location and structure of the industry, the schools moved away the places where the industry was established; thus while the schools which were located in developed and industrialized regions could provide jobs for their graduates, the others could not.

Concerning market demands, discourses about the employers' finding VHSs' graduates not qualified enough are frequently encountered. In this sense, the employers state that those who graduated from these high schools often apply for a job, but they can not acquire the required skills and it is difficult for them to find a qualified employee.

As for Turgutlu in which this research was carried out, it is possible to assert that VHSs graduates have better job opportunities compared to other cities because it has a developed industry and considered as a workcentre. However, it must be

noted that the students in the professional fields of mechatronics, electronics, metal, etc. have better chances to find jobs compared to students studying in different types of VHSs and other fields and most of other VHSs' graduates are working either as workers in factories or assistants in shops.

Accordingly, it can be inferred that whether VHSs fulfill its function of providing employment is based on such factors as its location, type of school, professional field, etc in Turkey.

## **2. Social Status of VHSs**

As to the social status of VHSs, all of the participants (f:14) are of the opinion that social status of these schools is quite low and they are considered as the schools where the students who can not go and succeed in AHSs have to attend. With this understanding, they argue that there is a decrease in the social status of VHSs especially in recent years. In this sense, the participants put forward such reasons as the graduates' working under more disadvantageous conditions than university graduates in terms of stability, rules and rights in business life; low income levels; graduates' preferring jobs with higher income and living standards. The participants' opinions on this issue are as following:

“The people in society consider VHSs as the schools where the students who can not be educated or trained at all attend. The common presumption is that if a student can not be successful at anything [as a profession], he/she should go to a VHS...” (P5).

“In terms of social status, VHSs are seen as a community where the worst [problematic in terms of economy, success, culture behaviours, etc] students come and undesirable events against teachers and administrators are experienced frequently” (P13).

In line with the participants' opinions about the social status of VHSs, it was also revealed in many other studies in the literature that social status of VHSs is low and there is a negative perception towards them in the society and VE is seen as worthless and ordinary (Demir, 2017; Eşme, 2007; Ahlatcı, 2015; Taşıtman, 2015). However, it must be noted that students' views of themselves from the perspective of others are effective in accepting or rejecting the schools and thus academic achievement (Sultana, 1995; Kayaalp, 2002). In this regard, Gamoran and Mare (1989:1146) argue that VHSs reinforce the academic failures and negative perceptions and attitudes of students who are already labelled as unsuccessful towards theory rather than trying to eliminate them. Therefore, it is possible to expect that the students also perceive themselves as “*the worst, the problematic, idle or nothing*” as observed in the statements of participants; so it will not be surprising to see the students who behave accordingly.

### **3. Socioeconomic Status of VHSs' Students**

Relating to the socioeconomic status of students studying at VHSs, it was found out that all of the participants (f: 14) stated that the socio-economic status of the students studying in VHSs is mostly low and it negatively affects their future choices and academic success. They also recorded that the students can not get support from their families as the families are not conscious enough about education. Thus, the students generally do not have any goals and they just aim to finish school as they want to have a job as soon as possible. Examples of participants' statements in this regard are shown below:

“Low economic status of families affect students' achievements negatively. The family has no chance to send their child to the university. They think they will not afford it when they send their child to university. They want their child to finish school and have a job and earn money as soon as possible” (P14).

“Most of the children contribute to the family budget by working. They work at night and come to school tired and sleepless. This situation affects their success negatively. They have no desire to learn. Neither the family nor the child has an aim ” (P13).

In parallel with these findings, it has also been identified in various studies that students attending VE constitute the most disadvantaged groups of the society and mostly come from low socio-economic and therefore educationally low level families. These arguments and their proofs can be found at many different researches and policy papers (Atmaca, 2019; Aksoy, 2015; Bülbül, 2014; Çelik and Göker, 2015; Devine, 2004; Emirgil, 2009; ERI, 2009; ERI, 2016; Furlong ve Cartmel, 1997; Jamieson ve Lightfoot, 1982; Hepkul, 2014; Oral and Mcgivney, 2014; Özdemir, 2016; Pınar, 2017; Polat, 2009; Taşıtman, 2015; Yılmaz, 2007, Yolcu, 2011). Within this context, Apple (1998: 349) argues that parents of socioeconomically lower class students consider VE as a “guarantee policy for their children's economic benefit” and send their children to these schools with the expectation that they have a job as soon as possible.

Although VHSs are considered as the schools which provide job guarantee by the participants, that VHSs restrict the students economically in terms of jobs they will have in future and thus they do not have high expectations was argued by a great majority of participants(f = 12) in this study. Participants’ expressions regarding this situation are as following:

“VHSs restrict the students economically... In terms of the content of teaching, it is difficult for them to reach occupations with high economic income.” (P9).

“Our graduates work with minimum wage or slightly above the minimum wage. Only 5% of our students can become financial advisor, a career profession, after

graduating from university and have the opportunity to reach higher levels economically” (P7).

“...With the education they receive here, their chance of attending a good university decreases. Generally, they prefer a two-years degree or they do not go to university at all. They usually work as shop assistants.”(P5).

In parallel with the opinions of participants, it has also been identified in some other researches that VHSs limit students' future work lives (Allen, 1996; Robertson, 1998; Sultana, 1995), and that the majority of graduates are inadequate in managerial, technical and professional skills such as group work, communication, foreign language, economic thinking at basic level (ERI, 2012; Şimşek, 1999).

With regard to the effects of socio-economic situations of VHSs on students' cultural and social competencies, a great majority of the participants (f=11) emphasized that the VHSs students are incompetent in terms of human relations and communication skills; they are indifferent to cultural and social issues and their cultural levels are low due to socio-economic status of their families and the restrictions of the environment in which they live. The participants stated their opinions regarding this situation as following:

“Our students are culturally low and they do not improve themselves. They are not sensitive and responsible . The school becomes the only environment of socialization for most of them. They have the opportunity to raise and realize themselves in a certain area, but the desired performance does not occur when environmental and economic factors are combined with vocational training” (P7).

“They are not very interested in cultural issues .Even if they are, they do not have enough opportunities economically. They can not buy newspapers or magazines” (P9).

“There are a lot of students who have never been to cinema or theatre and have gone out of the environment in which they live” (P12).

According to Notten, Lancee, Werfhorst and Ganzeboom (2014), cultural participation is an indicator of social status and it plays an important role in the transmission of social and educational inequality. Considering the views of participants in this regard, it is an expected situation that VHSs students “*who can not buy newspapers or magazines, have never been to the cinema or theater and never gone out of their environment and have to work to contribute to the family budget*” are left behind from the students of AHSs in terms of cultural development and pursue their own socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Within the context of cultural development, the participants also referred to the academic courses and they argued that both academic courses and students' interest and desire for these courses are not sufficient in these schools. One participant emphasized that culture courses are incomplete / inadequate with her such statement as “*many courses such as philosophy and sociology which enable students to think were either removed from the curriculum or course hours were decreased*” (P7).

In parallel with these statements, it was also revealed in various studies that academic courses are left behind (Özdemir, 2016; Demirtaş and Küçük, 2008; Şahin and Fındık, 2008), VHSs are not sufficient and do not provide equal conditions with AHSs in terms of preparing for higher education and ensuring cultural development (Bülbül, 2014; Çelik and Göker, 2015; Yalçın and Tavşancıl, 2014). However, it was identified that some of the participants of this study and the other studies in the literature (Çelik and Göker, 2012; Ersoy, 2007; Kılıçtepe, 2016; Özdemir, 2016; Smyth ve Down, 2005) associated the problems related to the low academic achievement and cultural development with the

factors such as student indifference, low academic competence, desperateness, etc and had a tendency to put the blame on the students. The statements regarding this situation are as follows:

“Academic courses can not be taught these students anyway. The child is already illiterate when he/she attends this school.” (P13)

“Cultural courses are sufficient in terms of course content and hours; but the interest and level of students are insufficient. The students are more interested in vocational courses than academic courses” (P9)

“The curriculum is the same but the academic competences of the students in these schools are very low. Their expectations are low. Most of the students completely disregard the school. Desperateness prevails among these students.”(P5)

“...The students think that they do not need these courses.” (P12)

As seen in the direct citations above and previous citations, the participants defined the VHSs' students with such statements as illiterate, insufficient, incompetent, worst, problematic etc and argued that these students do not need cultural (academic) courses. In parallel to these findings, Özdemir (2016) found that teachers considered students' indifference to academic knowledge and their failures in cultural courses as normal and they thought that these students would not need theoretical courses in their future lives. Willis (1977) argued in his well known study “*Learning to Labor. How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*” that working class kids develop an anti-school culture and consider studying and gaining certain qualifications as a tedious process and a waste of time. In a similar way, they see getting high grades as a pointless effort (Özdemir, 2016). Within this context, it is expected that the students internalize what their teachers think and reject the academic/cultural courses.



#### 4. Division of high schools as academic and vocational

As to the division of high schools as academic and vocational, it was revealed that half of the participants (f=7), perceived the division of high schools as vocational and academic as a required condition. According to these participants, VHSs are necessary due to the requirement for semi-skilled workers. Sample expressions selected from the participants' views regarding this situation are as follows:

“We do not have the chance to educate all of the students academically. We need semi-skilled workers as well, thus VHSs are necessary” (P1).

“Since students' perception capacity is not the same, it makes sense to make a distinction according to their interests, abilities and needs.” (P6).

However, it was identified that the other half of the participants (f=7) do not approve the division of high schools as vocational and academic. According to these participants, the interests and preferences of students may change in time; thus it is not right for students to be subjected to academic segregation based on academic achievement at an early age and exams that measure it at the end of primary education. The students should be able to change the type of school or area of study at any time. Also, they argued that the division of schools as vocational and academic reduces the quality of VHSs. One participant (P13) stated this as following: “The VHSs always have the students from the lowest class. We have an aimless student population. According to this division, we are idle. That kind of a division absolutely must not be allowed”

Taking the opinions of the participants about the division of schools as vocational and academic, it was revealed that while half of the teachers perceived the division as *a required condition* and made statements that justify the existing practice; the others argued that they do not approve the division as the students

are mostly urged to make a choice at an early age and this division works in favour of VHSs again. Based on the opinions of participants, it can be inferred that the majority of teachers actually confirm this division; however they do not approve the timing of this division and they are in the opinion that the division of VHSs and the students must coincide with the older ages of the students and include qualified students.

Concerning the students studying in VHSs, it was identified that most of the students have to prefer these schools as they can not get enough points in high school entrance exam and get accepted into other academic schools. Also, the participants emphasized the effect of the families and they argued that the desire of the family has been prominent in students' attending to the VHSs. The statements selected from the participants' views reflecting this situation are as follows:

“Exam scores are more effective in students' preferences rather than the area they are interested in. Successful students attend to science or Anatolian high schools. Those who are below a certain academic level attend wherever they can go.” (P5).

Some other participants who addressed the issue from the perspective of gender expressed their ideas on the subject with the following words: “Family preferences are effective in rural areas. For girls' VHSs, there is the mentality that there are no boys in these schools, so nobody can harm the girls” (P6).

Considering the views of participants, it is seen obviously that the students do not choose VHSs as they really wish; rather they mostly have to prefer due to such factors as low socio-economic status, not being able to get accepted to AHSs and family preferences. In fact, it must be noted that these three factors are significantly interrelated as socio-economic status determine preferences to a large extent and the students do not take central exams under equal conditions in Turkey. Within this context, while the students who have higher social status

have such opportunities as going to private schools, taking private courses while preparing for the exam, the students having lower social status do not have all these opportunities. Similar to our findings, various studies in the literature have confirmed that the students in the VHSs are mostly the ones who have the lowest socio-economic status, do not get enough points in central exams and cannot attend in AHSs or have to go to VHSs with their families' choices (Aşık, 2008; Demir, 2017, Eşme, 2007; Özcan, 2010; Yolcu, 2011).

Regarding the opportunities that VHSs students have, majority of participants (f = 11) argued that these students are not offered equal opportunities as the students in AHSs. Sample statements selected from the participants' views regarding this situation are shown below:

“Culturally, the environment of these children and children in other schools is not the same. Most of these children work outside far into the night and attempt to contribute to the family budget. The students in academic schools take private courses, the environment and culture they live in is very different” (P13).

“There are problems academically. As these children do not have academic background, they were brought to the VHSs by the system, it is very difficult to close the gap, the opportunities are not equal” (P11).

According to some participants (f = 6), studying in AHSs or VHSs plays a significant role on students' future expectations and lives. In this sense, the participants assert that while VHSs affect the students who start these schools willingly in a positive way; they affect those who are urged to prefer with the demands of their parents negatively. Thus, VHSs students have low expectations and they have the perception that it is enough to finish high school for them; they are also very much of the opinion that even if they want, they can not be successful. Accordingly, students fall behind both in setting appropriate targets

for their capacity and making sufficient efforts towards these objectives. One participant (P8) pointed out this: *“Since the society considers VHSs to be as the schools where just unsuccessful students go, the children do so, and after a while they can't even do what they can do ...”*

Considering the opinions of participants, it is clear that the students have to prefer these schools based on either exam results or family choices and they generally do not have equal conditions with the students in AHSs. Thus, this situation negatively affects their academic success and future expectation to a large extent and some kind of learned helplessness prevails among VHSs students.

## **Discussion**

Social stratification based on socioeconomic differences leads to inequalities in education, causing different schooling experiences and therefore different life opportunities for children from different classes (Durkheim, 1956; Down, 2006). Within this context, although students go through the same educational processes, students from lower social classes do not benefit from educational outcomes as much as others (Ünal and Özsoy, 1999). In other words, social origins of students determine their educational destiny (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 80). Accordingly, it is possible to refer to the existence of a segregation among students based on socio-economic status and this segregation and thus educational inequality manifests itself mostly in division of schools as academic and vocational (Jæger, 2009; Pfeffer, 2008, Ünal and Özsoy, 1999).

Within the context of division of schools as academic and vocation, Kincheloe (1995: 32) argued that the knowledge is divided artificially and two worlds are created: One of them is a world which academic knowledge that prepares students for university and a decreasing number of highly paid core jobs is appreciated and the other one is an “anti-matter world” that values knowledge of work and prepares students for jobs at the bottom end of the labour market.

Similarly, Dewey (1916: 327) addressed the problem within the context of democracy and introduced that by splitting the system and giving to others, less fortunately situated, an education conceived mainly as specific trade preparation, the schools are treated as the agencies for transferring the older division of labor and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class and this brings about a society nominally democratic.

VE and thus VHSs were initially conceived as a democratic reform to broaden the education system and provide opportunities for working-class children so that different segments of society could benefit from education (Greenberg, 2007). However, it can be argued that VHSs have diverged from this perception today and they function in a way to hide inequalities and class issues (Aksoy, 2015). As it is revealed in both this study and various studies in the literature, VHSs students, children of working class or families from low socio-economic families can not benefit from education as much as their peers from higher socio-economic status.

High schools in Turkey is divided into different types according to socio-economic background; there are quality differences between schools (ERI, 2011:21) and these differences are most clearly seen in the academic/vocational distinction. As it is revealed in this study and various studies in literature, socio-economic status of students in VHSs is mostly low and they bring this disadvantageous background to school with them. Once the inequality of conditions with AHSs in terms of ensuring academic and cultural development, preparing for higher education and providing jobs is included in this disadvantageous background, the dimension of inequality deepens more and the latest data of MoNE confirm this inequality. According to the reports of MoNE, 35 % of the graduates did not enroll in any higher education program and of those who enrolled, only 15 % of them enrolled in the undergraduate program. This

situation also reflected in the post graduation process and it was revealed that only 22 % of the graduates had a job and 80 % of those who could find jobs worked either with minimum wage or under minimum wages (Cumhuriyet Newspaper, 2018) Therefore, VHSs have become less respected in society today and lagged behind the academic schools as it is also thought as “a field of education where instrumental and thus worthless, insignificant information is given” (Sanderson, 1993, 189). This perception of insignificance and worthlessness towards VE and VHSs has also been reflected on students and the VHSs’s students have been seen as “the worst, problematic and idle students” by the society . What is more, the teachers have adopted this perception as well and labeled the students as “*incompetent, indifferent, aimless, insensitive, irresponsible, illiterate*, as it is revealed in this study and tended to lay low academic and cultural development of students and low social status of VHSs to students’ charge.

Considering the opinions of teachers, it can be inferred that the teachers ignore the socio-economic background of these students and this neglection is also clearly seen in the discourses regarding the division of high schools as academic and vocational. Regarding the division of schools, it was identified that almost half of the teachers considered the division of high schools as academic(*qualified*) and vocational (*unqualified*) as a required condition and justified this with low perception capacity of VHSs’s students. In parallel to the opinions of teachers, Minister of National Education made similar statements regarding VHSs as “*Industrialists demand us [Ministry of National Education] qualified intermediate workforce. Everybody does not have to be a university student. Too many chiefs, not enough indians*” (T24 Newspaper, 2020) and confirmed the division.

Based on both the opinions of teachers and the discourses of Minister of National Education, it can be argued that what is deemed for the students in VHSs is just being an intermediate workforce, not having a higher education or jobs with higher income, status, etc and it manifests itself with the failure rates of VHSs in university entrance exams and employment status of them after graduation. Therefore, it is expected that while the students from middle class families have the opportunity to have a higher education and move to upper classes; students from lower-class families, studying mostly in VHSs, will probably be deprived of higher education, income and status jobs and remain in the same class as their parents in the future (Devine, 2004; Ulufer, 1998: 84). Nevertheless, one point that must be noted is the statements regarding that the children themselves also are in a tendency to accept their destiny and maintain their class position as it is revealed both in this study and various studies in the literature (Aksoy, 2015; Özdemir, 2016). Within this context, Willis (1977) argues that the working class children's internalization that they are already incompetent and thus they deserve to work in jobs that are not desired by others is not just a simple acceptance of their destiny but it is a process that includes cultural contexts resulting with a resistance to theory and culture. In this regard, it can be argued that what creates these cultural contexts are policies, practices and discourses which ignore the criticisms directed to VE, the role it plays in the reproduction of social classes and its function of legitimizing existing power relations, social practices, unequal distribution of opportunities (Down, 2006; Kayaalp, 2002) and it is noteworthy to state that it is far from providing an equal and democratic culture.

### **Suggestions**

Democracy requires equal education in which the students are not divided through high schools and provided with an equal and one-track system of schooling (Adler, 1982: 5). Accordingly, it can be inferred that VHSs which are

the products of a division are far from exhibiting a democratic characteristics as they provide students with limited cultural and academic opportunities, focus on teaching of limited skills, force students to make limited choices and pave way for the education and training of students from a certain class background. In order to eliminate this limitedness it seems practical to provide some suggestions:

Taking the findings regarding VHSs's students' limited cultural and academic opportunities, a democratic VE which has a comprehensive program that can help students develop their personal competencies and expand their future career choices (Dewey, 1916) should be introduced. In this regard, academic and vocational education must be integrated and education and training that will be provided in VHSs should be organized in a way to enable the students develop in a holistically and comprehensively combining the intellectual and physical labor in one person. In this sense, the practices of *Village Institutes* which provided some kind of polytechnic education and comprehensive program by teaching art, craft, farm and academic issues all together can be taken as an example (Aksoy, 2015).

Also, considering the opinions of teachers about the placement of students in VHSs at an early age, it can be suggested that early occupational guidance is be done not directly, but indirectly in accordance with the interests and needs of the student and by ensuring the participation of him/her in the occupation itself (Dewey, 1916) and until students themselves wish to use their labor, VHSs should be made one part of learning or work which is intended for just pedagogic purposes (Aksoy, 2015).

Furthermore, in order to increase social status of VHSs, students from VHSs should be provided with the opportunity to have higher education and higher income and status jobs. In this sense, the transition of students to fields such as



engineering, medicine, etc can be facilitated. In this way, the diversity of students who will be educated in VHSs can be ensured and students from different socio-economic backgrounds can attend these schools.

All in all, the issue of VE should be considered within the perspective of reproduction of class positions of students. Otherwise, VHSs cannot go beyond being a shelter which delays the transition of children of socioeconomically disadvantaged families to low-income, low-quality employment for a few more years” (Çelik and Göker, 2015) and will maintain to become a challenging issue of our country...

### **Limitations and further research**

The greatest limitation of this study is that it reflects the opinions and observations of teachers working in VHSs not the real life experiences of students. Within this context, it is suggested that similar researches are carried out with the students studying in different type of VHSs and different regions in order to identify their experiences of being a VHS's student. Furthermore, the opinions of students in AHSs can be asked so that differences between the experiences of students could be determined. Also, although the qualitative method used in this study provided a profound picture of the views of teachers about the status of VHSs, its limited sample constitutes an impediment to generalize it to all teachers in Turkey and the whole participants of the research. In this sense, the reader is invited to judge the applicability of the findings and conclusions to other samples. Also, it is suggested to expand the sample size including principals, students, graduates, families and even the employers at workplaces for further studies. Lastly, in order to develop a full picture, additional critical studies are needed on VE and VHSs.

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