

## CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE Middle-class working mothers' quest for quality education in Türkiye

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**Abstract** This study explores the challenges middle-class working mothers face in Türkiye as they seek quality education for their children. In-depth interviews with twenty mothers from Ankara and Istanbul highlight a strong preference for private schooling, driven by parentocratic logic and concerns over the deteriorating quality of public education and ideological shifts in the curriculum. However, this choice demands significant sacrifices amid economic instability, rising inflation, and neoliberal policies. The findings underscore that securing quality education has become a challenge for families, reflecting broader systemic issues.

Keywords: Türkiye, education, middle-class, mothers.

### **Apanhadas no fogo cruzado: a busca por uma educação de qualidade entre mães trabalhadoras da classe média na Turquia**

**Resumo** Este estudo analisa as dificuldades enfrentadas por mães trabalhadoras da classe média na Turquia na procura de uma educação de qualidade para os seus filhos. Entrevistas aprofundadas realizadas com vinte mães residentes em Ancara e Istambul revelam uma forte preferência pelo ensino privado, motivada por uma lógica parentocrática e por preocupações relativas à degradação da qualidade do ensino público e às mudanças ideológicas nos programas curriculares. No entanto, esta escolha implica sacrifícios significativos num contexto de instabilidade económica, inflação crescente e políticas neoliberais. Os resultados evidenciam que o acesso a uma educação de qualidade se tornou um desafio relevante para as famílias, refletindo disfunções sistémicas mais amplas.

Palavras-chave: Turquia, educação, classe média, mães.

### **Prises entre deux feux: la quête d'une éducation de qualité chez les mères salariées de la classe moyenne en Turquie**

**Résumé** Cette étude examine les difficultés rencontrées par les mères salariées issues de la classe moyenne en Turquie dans leur recherche d'une éducation de qualité pour leurs enfants. Des entretiens approfondis menés auprès de vingt mères vivant à Ankara et à Istanbul révèlent une nette préférence pour l'enseignement privé, motivée par une logique parentocratique ainsi que par les préoccupations liées à la dégradation de la qualité de l'enseignement public et aux changements idéologiques dans les programmes scolaires. Toutefois, ce choix implique d'importants sacrifices dans un contexte d'instabilité économique, d'inflation galopante et de politiques néolibérales. Les résultats mettent en évidence que l'accès à une éducation de qualité constitue désormais un défi majeur pour les familles, reflétant des dysfonctionnements systémiques plus larges.

Mots-clés: Turquie, éducation, classe moyenne, mères.

### **Atrapadas en fuego cruzado: la búsqueda de una educación de calidad entre madres trabajadoras de clase media en Turquía**

**Resumen** Este estudio analiza las dificultades que enfrentan las madres trabajadoras de clase media en Turquía en su búsqueda de una educación de calidad para sus hijos. Entrevistas en profundidad realizadas a veinte

madres residentes en Ankara y Estambul revelan una clara preferencia por la educación privada, motivada por una lógica parentocrática y por la preocupación ante el deterioro de la educación pública y los cambios ideológicos en los planes de estudio. No obstante, esta elección conlleva sacrificios importantes en un contexto de inestabilidad económica, aumento de la inflación y políticas neoliberales. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto que acceder a una educación de calidad se ha convertido en un reto significativo para las familias, reflejando problemas sistémicos más amplios.

Palabras-clave: Turquía, educación, clase media, madres.

## Introduction: parentocracy and “moral dilemma” in contemporary Türkiye

On January 17, 2025, an article titled “Parents face a moral dilemma: which of our children should we withdraw from private school?” was published in a well-known online news outlet. The article opened with the following remarks:

Do not be misled by announcements claiming there will not be “exorbitant tuition increases” in private schools or by the so-called 54.8% cap on tuition hikes! This limit only applies to continuing students; parents of first, fifth, and ninth graders may face higher price increases. Let us estimate at least 100% — if not more. Moreover, if that were the only issue, it would still be manageable! Even if tuition fees remain stable, meal prices could spike by 300%, and transportation costs may also rise! One grandmother noted that parents are getting by with tea and *simit*<sup>1</sup> to cover these expenses. However, what about those who cannot make ends meet? Next year, they will have no choice but to transfer their children to public schools. Some families must make a tough choice—one child will stay in a private school while another will move to a public school. Is there a worse *moral dilemma* than this? (Şenocaklı, 2025).

This study took place one year before the publication of this newspaper article, interviewing middle-class working mothers. The participants were already struggling with this issue. They shared their experiences with overlapping pressures, resembling being caught in the crossfire of competing demands from parentocratic values, societal expectations, and local socio-economic circumstances. These pressures indicate a broader trend in modern parenting, where parents navigate complex choices from pregnancy onward, believing that each decision influences their children’s future success and well-being (Kolluoğlu and Dinçer, 2023; Ruhl, 1999). Especially in neoliberal societies, parents feel driven to make the best educational decisions for their children, providing them with the skills necessary to compete in a challenging job market.

The concept of “parentocracy”, introduced by Brown (1990), refers to a societal shift in which educational outcomes are increasingly linked to parents’

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1 *Simit* is a traditional Turkish street food similar to a sesame-crusted bagel. It is known for being an affordable and widely accessible snack. In this context, it symbolizes financial hardship, as parents struggling to afford rising school costs are described as subsisting on the cheapest possible meals.

resources and privileges. This shift reinforces neoliberal approaches, placing the responsibility for children's futures on families rather than the state. DeWiele and Edgerton (2015) revisited this notion, demonstrating its ongoing relevance in understanding the experiences of today's middle-class parents. They identified two key aspects: First, parentocracy functions as a socio-political logic that promotes parental sovereignty and market-driven mechanisms as pathways to educational success, often favoring those with greater economic and cultural capital. Second, it reflects an interventionist parenting style, wherein parents actively manage their children's development, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset that emphasizes acquiring skills and credentials to achieve upward mobility.

In this parentocratic era, middle-class families, driven by values of responsibility, individualism, and cultural reproduction, invest significantly in exploring educational options to secure their children's future amidst changing societal and economic landscapes (Reay, Crozier and James, 2011). This emphasis on education aligns with broader trends, as a substantial focus within the sociology of education has been directed at how parental aspirations and practices reinforce social advantages (Golden et al., 2021). The interventionist logic of parentocracy closely aligns with these values, as middle-class parents increasingly adopt strategies to preserve their social status through education. Reay, Crozier and James (2011) argue that school choice provides an insightful lens for understanding middle-class identity, as families invest considerably in making "correct" choices during times of rising uncertainty and risk.

The Turkish middle-class parenting approach aligns with global trends, as Çelik and Özdemir (2022) describe it as "globally aspired". Uner and Gungordu (2016) found that middle-class Turkish parents prioritize education and foreign language proficiency to secure their children's futures. Expanding on this, Buyruk (2020) illustrates the strategies Turkish middle-class parents employ to navigate the parentocracy-driven education system by leveraging economic, social, and cultural capital — often circumventing address-based enrollment regulations through strategic housing or workplace addresses.

Mothers play an essential role in educational decision-making, as highlighted by Özmantar and Karataşoğlu (2019). In particular, working middle-class mothers serve as key informants, navigating economic pressures, caregiving responsibilities, and aspirations for social mobility. This study explores the challenges these mothers face in obtaining quality education for their children, based on findings collected through interviews with 20 mothers. We will begin by examining the historical dynamics that have shaped the modern education system, followed by an analysis of our findings.

## **Education system in Türkiye**

### *Historical context*

In 1923, the Turkish Republic was established from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. The republic's founders, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, faced a fragmented

educational system. This system included a vast network of Islamic and minority schools at the primary and secondary levels, along with newly established professional schools for medicine, engineering, and the military, as well as a few secular primary and secondary schools from the 19th and early 20th centuries (Fortna, 2002). This disjointed educational system was unified under a single administrative and ideological framework, reducing the influence of religious schools. The new parliament enacted a law on March 3, 1924, consolidating all educational and scientific institutions under the Ministry of National Education. Shortly afterward, a decree was issued to close religious secondary schools (madrasahs). The establishment of a secular system centered on Turkish nationalism and Western ideals marked a revolutionary transformation (Kafadar, 1997; Nohl and Somel, 2020).

The military coup on September 12, 1980, led to the establishment of a new official ideology known as the Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, which combined Islam with Turkish nationalism and positioned Islam as a vital component of national identity (Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017). After the coup, Turkish citizens were asked to approve a new constitution that would implement long-term restrictions on the political system. The Motherland Party (in Turkish: *Anavatan Partisi*, abbreviated as ANAP) subsequently won the elections and maintained power until 1991, gaining support from economic liberals and Islamic groups. During this period, the previously state-controlled import-substitution industrialization strategy was replaced with an open-market economic policy, marking the initiation of neoliberal policies in Türkiye (Nohl and Somel, 2020). Neoliberal policies transformed education from a state-provided public service financed by public resources into a venture involving the private sector. This transition resulted in decreased state funding for education, an overall reduction in the budget allocated to public education (Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017), and the transfer of services, properties, and responsibilities from the government to the private sector (Cinoglu, 2006).

The Justice and Development Party (in Turkish: *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, abbreviated as AKP) came to power in 2002, marking a pivotal moment in Turkish politics. By leveraging the 2001 economic crisis, voter dissatisfaction with established parties, and a 10% electoral threshold, the newly formed AKP secured over two-thirds of the parliamentary seats and achieved power without coalition partners (Ugur, 2017). Since 2002, each term of AKP governance has introduced significant changes across all aspects of education, including school governance, teaching methods, and curriculum content.

During the first term (2002-2007), the AKP's education policies aimed to align educational reforms with EU standards and global neoliberal trends. These policies included implementing School-Based Management to decentralize financial and governance responsibilities, introducing a free textbook program, and initiating regular assessments for monitoring purposes (İnal and Akkaymak, 2012). Since the beginning of this term, secular symbols and pedagogical methods have diminished (Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017). During this period, neoliberal policies in Türkiye gained momentum, leading to the restructuring of the education system to meet market economy demands. Nearly every level of public education has been privatized, with numerous nationwide exams determining admissions to top public

schools and universities. The intense competition for these exams drives many students to enroll in private courses to improve their chances. Furthermore, various school services, such as maintenance, transportation, and cafeteria operations, have been outsourced to private firms, resulting in increased costs for students and job insecurity for workers (İnal and Akkaymak, 2012). Inadequate national budget allocation for public education has caused numerous infrastructural issues in public school buildings. Common areas like restrooms and libraries are equipped with outdated tools and furniture. The lack of investment in schools undermines the quality of public education, pushing students and parents to seek alternatives such as private institutions (İnal and Akkaymak, 2012).

In 2012, the 4+4+4 Reform was implemented, an omnibus law that restructured compulsory education. This reform extended mandatory education, including high school, from 8 to 12 years. The integrated eight years of primary and lower-secondary education were divided into distinct four-year primary and lower-secondary schools. This change allowed for the reopening of lower-secondary religious-oriented *Imam Hatip* schools, which had been closed since the 1997 reform (Nohl and Somel, 2020). “The Imam Hatip schools are public vocational secondary educational institutions designed to prepare students to gain knowledge of Islam and, upon graduation, ideally occupy religious functionary positions such as *imam* or *muezzin* in mosques throughout the country. Many graduates also become Quran teachers and instructors of other religious subjects” (Pak, 2004).

During this period, constructivist pedagogy was adopted, challenging the objectivity and universality of scientific knowledge as a means to create space for religion in education (Ünder, 2012). This educational strategy aligns with the AKP government’s goal of raising a religious generation, as stated by party leader and then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (“Dindar Gençlik Yetiştireceğiz”, 2012). Thus, the AKP’s educational strategy merges the ideological aims of desecularization with neoliberal economic policies, reshaping Turkish society according to its religious and economic vision. In the next section, we will examine recent developments and ongoing challenges in Türkiye’s educational landscape, along with the effects of past reforms on the quality and accessibility of education.

### *Current status*

Turkish education policies during the AKP’s rule have become a significant point of contention, provoking disputes among politicians, various social groups, and academic circles (Nohl and Somel, 2020). Some scholars view the AKP’s education policies as attempts to democratize the system by moving away from a “monocultural” and “centralist” approach, thereby aligning education more closely with the cultural demands of the majority (Çelik, 2014; Çelik and Gür, 2013; Sen and Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Conversely, others criticize these policies, arguing that they foster privatization, the Islamization of educational content, and authoritarian governance in line with global neoliberal trends (İnal and Akkaymak, 2012; Kandiyoti and Emanet, 2017). The debates are particularly intense around several critical issues: the privatization of education, which imposes rising costs on parents; the severely limited budget allocation

for public schools that hinders quality educational options for children; and the frequently changing curriculum, influenced by ideological priorities rather than universal values. Below, we will discuss these issues under the main headings.

### Privatization of education, rampant inflation, and economic burdens on parents

The AKP government in Türkiye has restructured education through a neoliberal discourse, promoting privatization, competition, and alignment with market needs, while public schools struggle with insufficient resources. This shift has led to the commodification of education, undermining democratic, free, and accessible public schooling (İnal, 2012; Özsoy, 2023; Kurul, 2012). Since the 1980s, private schools have expanded from exclusively serving the wealthy elite to middle and lower-middle-class families, becoming a vital part of the education system (Altun Arslan, 2019; Doğan, 2020). According to the latest education statistics released by the Ministry of Education, in Türkiye, 61,111 public formal education institutions and 14,352 private formal education institutions are currently active (Ministry of National Education Republic of Türkiye, 2024). Middle-class families are increasingly choosing private schools, viewing them as superior to public schools due to their better infrastructure, resources, foreign language programs, and smaller class sizes (İnal, 2012; Doğan, 2020; Özmantar and Karataşoğlu, 2019). However, the rising costs of private education, compounded by persistent inflation, impose a growing financial burden on the urban middle class.

As we move into 2025, inflation in Türkiye remains high despite some moderation, with persistent core inflation and elevated expectations continuing to pose risks to price stability (*OECD Economic Outlook* — OECD 2024). The Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) reports that the consumer price index (CPI) rose by 42.12% annually as of January 2025, with the most significant increase seen in education costs at a staggering 99.93% (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2025).<sup>2</sup> This sharp rise places considerable financial strain on families, forcing them to allocate a larger portion of their budgets to education, often at the expense of other essentials.

### Limited budget allocation for public schools

Global public education expenditures have gradually declined, with many countries failing to meet international targets. Education aid and funding remain a low priority compared to other sectors (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2024). In the Turkish context, the studies by Arabacı (2011) and Ömür and Giray (2016) provide detailed analyses showing that public education expenditure in Türkiye has consistently remained below the OECD average. This trend significantly indicates the privatization of education, which accelerated after the 1980s. The latest OECD report confirms that this trend continues today. Government

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2 Please refer to figure 1 in Appendices.

expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP, the final source of funds covering primary, secondary, and post-secondary non-tertiary education, remains low at 2.0%, notably below the OECD average of 3.2% (OECD Education GPS, 2024). Conversely, private expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP, the final source of funds for primary, secondary, and post-secondary non-tertiary education, stands at 0.6%, exceeding the OECD average of 0.3% (OECD Education GPS, 2024).

These indicators highlight the persistent underinvestment in public education in Türkiye, as government spending remains significantly below the OECD average. The increasing dependence on private spending places a growing burden on households, worsening educational inequalities. With limited funds allocated to public schools, issues such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate resources, and lower teacher salaries continue to compromise the quality and accessibility of education.

### Ideologically structured and frequently changing curriculum

Along with neoliberal policies, after 2002, with the rule of AKP, Türkiye witnessed “an ideological shift in Turkish education, from secularist nationalism to conservative nationalism” (Nohl and Somel, 2020). Under successive AKP administrations, revisions were made to both primary and secondary education curricula in 2004 and 2017. These changes corresponded with the prevailing neoliberal and conservative educational agendas of their times (Nohl and Somel, 2020). The increasing focus on religious education in the curriculum marks a significant turning point in Turkish education policy. The latest public school curricula are characterized as “value-oriented” and predominantly reflect Sunni Islamic religious values, which has led to the erosion of the principle of secularism in education and reinforced sexist and discriminatory attitudes (Tunçel, 2017).

The conservative-nationalistic shift in the Turkish education system, with its emphasis on Sunni Islamic religious values, has not always been embraced by the secular segment of middle-class parents or those with diverse religious orientations. As argued by Akbulut and Usal (2008), compulsory religious education in Turkish public schools, which promotes Sunni Islamic values, infringes upon the religious rights of minority groups, particularly Alevis, and fails to provide a neutral and inclusive approach, thus violating parents’ rights to ensure their children’s education aligns with their own religious and philosophical beliefs.

In May 2024, Turkish education faced another round of curricular changes, sparking reactions from various segments of society. The Education and Science Laborers Union (Eğitim-Sen) stated that the new education curriculum, developed by the Ministry of National Education, aligns more with the ruling party’s political-ideological agenda than with the actual needs of children and society. They highlighted that the curriculum changes affect preschool, primary, middle, and high school education, marking a significant shift from secular and scientific education toward religious indoctrination and nationalistic values, while criticizing the lack of comprehensive consultations with scientists, education experts, and

educational unions. It is noted that the curriculum is designed to fit the government's vision of the "ideal citizen," reflecting the political ideology of those in power rather than focusing on cultivating critical thinking and scientific inquiry (Eğitim-Sen, 2024).

Education policies in public schools in Türkiye, influenced by ideological perspectives, push secular middle-class working mothers toward private schools to obtain an education consistent with universal values, secularism, and pluralism. Private schools often adopt a relatively secular curriculum, focusing on universal principles and scientific rigor.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the educational decision-making processes of middle-class working mothers in Türkiye. A total of 20 participants were recruited through snowball sampling, ensuring diversity in occupation, age, and working modalities.<sup>3</sup> A purposive sampling technique was utilized to recruit participants who met specific criteria: working mothers with preschool-aged children residing in urban areas of Ankara and Istanbul, identified as middle-class based on a combination of socioeconomic indicators. Preschool age is a pivotal stage for school choice, as families often commit to either the private or public schooling track during this period; those who choose private preschools typically continue along the private education pathway, while those opting for public options tend to remain within the public school system for subsequent formal education. All participants in this study were married and currently living with their spouses, whose occupations included roles such as engineers, small business owners, and government employees. The households primarily represented dual-income families, aligning with the socioeconomic markers of the Turkish middle class.

Middle-class status was defined using the following parameters:

- *Education level*: at a minimum, university graduates; some hold graduate degrees.
- *Occupation*: employment in professional, skilled, or stable positions.
- *Income*: estimated household income compared to national urban averages, although specific figures were not disclosed.
- *Housing and resources*: ownership or rental of typical urban housing, a car, and access to educational resources like extracurricular activities or private tutoring for children.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 60 to 90 minutes were conducted virtually. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and

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3 Please refer to Table 1 in Appendices.



anonymized using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews, who were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time.

## Findings and discussion

### *Hesitant choices: school selection under the shadow of economic and ideological pressures*

All the participants interviewed had enrolled their children in private preschools and expressed a clear preference for continuing private education into formal schooling. Only two participants indicated a preference for public schools. One participant stated that financial constraints forced her to choose public schooling as a reluctant option, given that private school tuition was beyond her budget. Despite this, she emphasized her commitment to enhancing her child's education through extracurricular activities. The other participant likewise expressed her concern about the "financial sustainability" of private schooling. This suggests that while private education is generally seen as the preferred choice, the sustainability of this preference often remains difficult to predict.

Participant 1-IS (37 years old, data analyst, with two preschool-aged children from Istanbul) vividly illustrates this financial strain, describing it as a "nightmare" and noting that "her child's school fees have soared by 140%, while her salary has only increased by 70%". Her statement emphasizes how inflation-driven increases in school fees far outpace salary adjustments, worsening financial insecurity. The concern over whether tuition costs will continue to rise underscores the unpredictability of long-term educational financial planning. She states:

Will private school fees continue to rise like this? The ages of 0 to 6 are crucial, and my child will attend preschool for two more full academic years. Instead of enrolling him in public schools, we will keep him in his current private preschool. We will tighten our belts as a couple, avoid trips abroad, and limit our vacations to the bare minimum to provide him with a better education.

Despite the strain, her decision to keep her child in a private preschool underscores a perceived quality gap between public and private education. The willingness to cut back on discretionary spending, such as travel and vacations, further demonstrates how middle-income families adjust their lifestyles to ensure what they view as a better educational future for their children. This trade-off illustrates the intersection of parental aspirations with economic hardship, where education becomes a site of both an investment and a source of anxiety.

Participant 8-IS (38 years old, educator and preschool principal, with one preschool-aged child from Istanbul) expresses concern about decreasing purchasing power and downward mobility. Her worries align with Ehrenreich's

(2020) definition of “fear of falling,” which refers to middle-class anxieties regarding economic precarity and downward class mobility. She states:

In Istanbul, I can no longer define my economic class. While I have always thought of myself as middle class, I’m uncertain about that these days.

The participant also highlights how financial stress reshapes household dynamics, introducing practices such as meticulous budgeting to manage expenditures:

My spouse and I had never talked about money before. Now, I even keep a ledger to track our monthly income and expenses. Instead of just spending, I invest in a savings account for our child.

This shift towards financial micromanagement, mainly saving for her child, indicates prioritizing long-term educational and economic security over immediate consumption. Such practices align with parentocratic ideals, where families view education as a crucial vehicle for upward mobility and invest in their children’s futures despite current hardships.

Participant 8-AN (37 years old, industrial engineer, with one preschool-aged child from Ankara) advocates for reducing education taxes by proposing that the government offer tax deductions for private school fees to alleviate the financial burden on families who opt for private education. As she explains:

This economic uncertainty significantly impacts our lives, and my child is affected as well. If I opt for private education and lighten some of the state’s burden, the government should offer tax deductions for school fees. School fees have increased dramatically, while our income has not risen at the same pace.

Her suggestion underscores the growing disparity in the education system, where families choosing private schooling to fill perceived gaps in public education face a substantial financial burden, with no government aid to help ease the costs. Participant 10-IS (33 years old, purchasing manager for a clothing company, with one preschool-aged child from Istanbul) similarly discussed economic pressures:

The school I chose for my son is relatively more affordable than other institutions. His current school is a mid-range institution. When he transitioned to kindergarten, there was a sharp increase in fees — from 3500 TL to 7500-8000 TL. This was the first time I experienced such a significant hike. This year, the fee has risen to 12,500 TL. Meanwhile, my salary in the textile industry has not increased yet. Financial considerations were a significant factor in choosing this school. I did not want my son to attend a public school during his early years of education.

These accounts highlight the delicate balancing act that middle-class families must navigate as they weigh affordability against the quality of education. Participants emphasize a persistent tension: the desire to secure quality education through

private schools conflicts with the financial challenges of stagnant incomes and rising costs.

*Perceptions and concerns of public and private schools*

The findings reveal the complex nature of middle-class mothers' decisions between public and private schools, where affordability intersects with concerns about curriculum, teacher quality, and infrastructure issues, influencing their preferences and sacrifices. As Participant 1-AN (37 years old, food engineer, with one preschool-age child from Ankara) expressed: "Finding the most suitable school and a quality education while considering other factors is not easy at all." Mothers attend informational meetings and dedicate long hours to the admission processes for their children's schools. Participant 4-IS (40 years old, market research manager, with one preschool-age child from Istanbul) highlighted many parents' dilemmas: "Private schools are often praised for their hygiene, security, and counseling services but criticized for potential shortcomings in teacher quality due to longer hours and lower pay." This tension reflects the broader perception that private schools provide superior facilities but may not always meet the pedagogical standards of public schools.

For Participant 5-IS (42 years old, architect with two children, one of whom is preschool-age from Istanbul), the decision to choose private schooling stems from dissatisfaction with the public school curriculum's strong emphasis on religious education. She highlighted the importance of a well-rounded educational experience, which she believes is vital for her child's future opportunities. Her choice to prioritize private schooling vividly illustrates how family values impact school selection, even within economic limitations. Despite the financial sacrifices and the convenience of a nearby public school, the family has chosen private education. She remarks:

The debate between public and private schools presents a unique challenge in education. While I value religious education and believe that children should have the opportunity to explore and form their own beliefs, I am concerned about placing too much emphasis on religious studies over other subjects in public school curricula. To ensure a broader educational experience for our children, we have allocated our budget to enroll them in a private school. Despite the convenience of a nearby state middle school, we chose private education, even though our child takes the service bus to get there. We carefully weighed the advantages and disadvantages before ultimately selecting a moderate-level private school.

Participant 9-AN (39 years old, lawyer with one preschool-age child from Ankara) emphasizes the increasing difficulty of obtaining affordable secular education:

We all send our children to private schools for a secular education; all middle-class families do this, finding it according to their own budget, but even it became less affordable this year.

Participant 6-IS (40 years old, marketing manager in the Real Estate Sector with one preschool-age child from Istanbul) reflected on the unsustainability of private school fees, revealing her hesitant consideration of public schools as a cost-saving option. However, she expressed doubts about the quality of public education, committing to enhancing her child's learning with extracurricular activities. This underscores parents' adaptive strategies to navigate economic barriers, leveraging external resources to close perceived gaps in public schooling. She describes this choice as a "moral dilemma" as well:

Currently, my main moral dilemma is whether to enroll my child in a private or public elementary school to ensure a strong educational foundation. We are nearly 99% leaning towards a public school this year due to the high costs associated with private education. I find the financial burden increasingly unmanageable, even with payment plans. Unfortunately, our current private school, which was initially the most affordable option, is no longer viable because of its steep costs. The public school is our only alternative. Nevertheless, we are committed to enhancing our child's education through extracurricular activities like after-school study sessions.

Participant 8-IS (38 years old, educator and preschool principal, with one preschool-age child from Istanbul) expressed deep mistrust of both public and private schools. She expresses her preference for the French educational model and a French-speaking school:

I do not want my son to grow up in the Turkish education system. In my opinion, many schools are pedagogically flawed and inadequate, staffed by poorly qualified teachers. Underpaid and overworked educators cannot be expected to excel; they view their jobs as routine and struggle to connect with children.

She is hesitant to enroll her child in either public or private schools within the Turkish educational system, regarding the French school as the only viable and secular option.

Public primary schools are no longer an option for us. In Istanbul, many families sacrifice their entire earnings to send their children to private schools to avoid issues in public schools, such as enforced religious teachings, bullying, and other negative experiences. Some parents would rather go hungry than enroll their child in a public school. Many private schools are not ideal alternatives since they have been converted from apartment buildings and lack essential facilities like gardens and appealing environments. These schools are often run by business owners without an educational background, raising concerns about their vision and effectiveness. Although I do not want to leave my country, I cannot subject my child to this flawed system.

Participant 10-AN (39 years old, psychologist with two children, one of whom is preschool-age, from Ankara) expressed concerns about the financial sustainability of private schooling and chose a public school instead. To ensure quality education,

she regularly donates to the school for additional resources such as supplementary books and activity fees, which total over 5,000 TL per month.

The final account from Participant 4-IS (40 years old, market research manager, with one preschool-age child from Istanbul) captures the hesitant and uncertain nature of parental decision-making regarding schooling:

We chose a mid-tier private school despite our continued doubts about it. We are particularly concerned about the teachers in these institutions. In the past, working at a private school was considered advantageous for educators. That is no longer true — they work longer hours for lower pay. Many of them are teachers who could not secure positions in public schools. We recognize that private schools provide better hygiene, security, and counseling services. However, regarding teaching quality, we have serious concerns about primary education. We will likely continue with private schooling, but we have not been able to decide with complete confidence.

As participants discuss the Turkish education system, many mothers voice longstanding concerns, emphasizing dissatisfaction with both public and private options. Public education is often overlooked because of worries about the ideological biases in the curriculum and insufficient resources. Meanwhile, despite being seen as advantageous, private schools receive criticism for their high costs, teaching quality, and profit-oriented management. This conflict highlights the paradox of education privatization, which influences educational choices amid limited and frequently inadequate options.

## Conclusion

Türkiye's modern education system presents middle-class families with a complex yet often contradictory landscape shaped by economic instability, neoliberal policies, and ideological shifts. The middle-class working mothers we interviewed expressed several pressing factors that influence their school choices. They described how financial constraints, ideological concerns, and systemic shortcomings leave them feeling caught in a crossfire. While private schooling remains the preferred choice due to perceived deficiencies in public education, financial limitations and rising costs render it an increasingly precarious option. Parents constantly negotiate between affordability and quality, resulting in hesitant and often reluctant educational choices. Secular families, in particular, see private education as crucial for better academic outcomes and alignment with their values. As middle-class families strive to secure quality education, they make strategic financial sacrifices; many adopt meticulous budgeting practices, prioritizing long-term educational investment over immediate consumption.

This study highlights significant concerns regarding both public and private schools. Public education often faces criticism for ideological biases in the curriculum and a lack of resources, leading to doubts about its capacity to provide adequate learning environments. Meanwhile, private schools, despite their perceived

benefits, are subject to scrutiny due to high costs, inconsistent teaching quality, and profit-driven management. This paradox emphasizes the implications of educational privatization and illustrates the complex nature of school choice, where economic, ideological, and quality-related issues converge. The ongoing privatization of education, along with financial pressures, calls for a closer examination of policy interventions to address educational inequalities. As noted by DeWiele and Edgerton (2015), parentocratic approach further deepens these inequalities, as families with more social and economic capital strategically position their children for success, thus perpetuating social reproduction. The middle-class mothers we interviewed are fully aware of these educational disparities and do not endorse their persistence; rather, they strive to respond tactically to these disparities to secure the best possible education for their children.

As mentioned in the introduction, Mine Şenocaklı reports that families in Türkiye in 2025 do not easily make educational decisions without facing a “moral dilemma”, a year declared “Family Year” by President Erdoğan<sup>4</sup>. Although this initiative, framed around concerns about declining birth rates and changing family structures, reinforces state-led expectations for larger families, it nevertheless presents a crucial opportunity to shed light on the socio-economic challenges families face. As the “Family Year” revitalizes discussions about family policies in Türkiye, it is essential to recognize how market-driven education structures create educational inequalities and risk further marginalizing families lacking resources. Actual progress requires a shift toward a more inclusive and equitable model, ensuring that quality education is not a privilege determined by financial and ideological constraints but a fundamental right accessible to all.

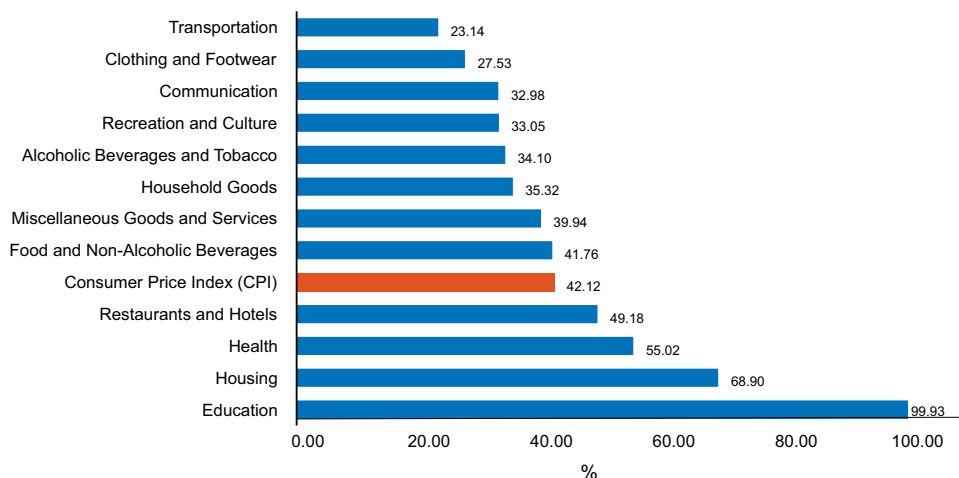
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4 The “Family Year” Program aims to reinforce conservative family values in Türkiye. President Erdoğan announced initiatives like the “Family and Youth Fund” (Aile ve Gençlik Fonu), offering interest-free loans to young couples, and the establishment of the “Family Institute” (Aile Enstitüsü) and “Population Policies Board” (Nüfus Politikaları Kurulu) to shape demographic strategies (Ministry of Family and Social Services of the Republic of Türkiye, 2025).

## Appendices

**Table 1** Demographics of participants

Participant's code	Age	City	Working modality	Occupation	Child's age
1-AN	37	Ankara	Full-time/remote	Food engineer	6
2-AN	36	Ankara	Full-time/office	Expert in public institution	6
3-AN	38	Ankara	Full-time/remote	Interior designer	6
4-AN	38	Ankara	Full-time/office	Birth and family photographer	4.5
5-AN	33	Ankara	Full-time/remote	Expert in logistics firm	1.5
6-AN	29	Ankara	Freelance/hybrid	Piano teacher	2
7-AN	34	Ankara	Full-time/hybrid	Expert in an international organisation	6
8-AN	37	Ankara	Full-time/office	Industrial engineer	6
9-AN	39	Ankara	Freelance/hybrid	Lawyer	3.5
10-AN	39	Ankara	Freelance/hybrid	Psychologist	9/6
1-IS	37	Istanbul	Full-time/hybrid	Data analyst	4/1
2-IS	33	Istanbul	Full-time/remote	Advertising sales and project director at media company	2
3-IS	39	Istanbul	Freelance/remote	Art director	4/1
4-IS	40	Istanbul	Part-time/remote	Market research manager	5
5-IS	42	Istanbul	Freelance	Architect	10/3.5
6-IS	40	Istanbul	Full-time/office	Marketing manager in the real estate sector	6
7-IS	35	Istanbul	Full-time/hybrid	Software specialist	6
8-IS	38	Istanbul	Full-time/hybrid	Educator and school principal	2.5
9-IS	36	Istanbul	Part-time/hybrid	Academic in the field of Developmental Psychology	3 years /8 months
10-IS	33	Istanbul	Full-time/office	Purchasing manager for a clothing company	6



**Figure 1** Annual Change Rates of Consumer Price Index by Main Expenditure Groups (%), January 2025

Source: Turkish Statistical Institute (2025, February 3). *Consumer Price Index, January 2025*. Retrieved from <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Consumer-Price-Index-January-2025-54176&dil=2>

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