How Schools’ Institutional Habitus Shape the Educational Achievement of Children from Working-Class Ethnic Minority and Immigrant Backgrounds: A Comparative Case Study in Germany and Turkey

The Istanbul Policy Center - Sabancı University - Stiftung Mercator Initiative organized a report launch on Monday, February 27, 2017 to discuss 2015/16 Mercator-IPM Fellow Çetin Çelik’s report "Institutional Habitus and Educational Achievement: A Comparative Case Study in Germany and Turkey." The report was launched with the participation of Prof. Dr. Kenan Çayır, Istanbul Bilgi University Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Sociology, who discussed the role of schools, educational performance, and the sense of belonging to school for students coming from ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds.

Before Çetin Çelik’s presentation, Kenan Çayır began by making a brief introduction to the talk. Çayır highlighted the lack of pluralistic education models that include different cultures and how this is becoming a serious problem in Turkey and around the world. Stating that the main reason for the absence of such an educational system in Turkey is the centralized nature of the Turkish national education system, Çayır explained that this educational system is not suitable to include different languages and cultures.

In addition, Çayır pointed out that the liberal, individualistic mentality derived from the middle-class family structure and the lack of adequate support between the national policy makers and teachers are the primary obstacles to developing an inclusive model for education in Turkey. Çayır highlighted that there is a growing demand for this type of model. According to Çayır, the increasingly widespread reports on the integration of different minority groups in Turkey, such as Kurds, Roma, and Syrians, into the education system brought with it the need for qualified research on a more inclusive education model.

Çetin Çelik began his talk by stating that the role of schools in educational inequality was the center of his presentation. According to Lareau's research, there is an inequality in education among working-class children, and this kind of inequality among the children of the immigrant families is one of the factors that pushes Çelik to do this research. In the transition from home to school, children from migrant and minority classes, like children from the working class, are also confronted with a great shock, thereby making them introverted and causing them to fail in education. Such a shock experienced by children from certain segments is caused by the prevalence of the middle-class family model. In such a bourgeois class, parents often raise their children to act with more self-confident than children in other classes by enrolling their children in activities such as social activities and language courses and taking a clearer attitude towards their children about what needs to be done toward their success. This model also makes children from segments such as workers and immigrant classes grow less self-confident in comparison with middle-class children. Immigrant children are also more likely to become introverted and fall behind in education because of differences in ethnic and cultural identity.

It is in this context that Çelik contributes to the literature on educational inequality. Çelik, who has chosen a school from intensively immigrant regions in Germany and Turkey to study in detail, is trying to understand the way in which these schools operate and how their institutional habitus affects students from immigrant and minority backgrounds. At this point, Çelik emphasized the importance of the concept of “habitus,” explaining that the concept focuses on school’s curriculum, organization, the rules of education, and the effects of school on students.

In Germany, Çelik observed the Neuen Oberschule Gröpelingen (NOG) school in Bremen. This school was opened in 2010 in a region where the number of Turkish immigrants is large and has significantly increased the educational attainment of immigrant children with different educational models. In Turkey, Çelik examined Kanarya Secondary School in Küçükçekmece province, which provides education predominantly to the children of Kurdish immigrant parents. He explained the methods employed throughout his study, in which he
interviewed teachers, students, and families in these 
schools. Based on these two school studies, Çelik 
followed a comparative methodology to see the 
effects of institutional habitus on students.

In NOG there are certain policies in place to 
encourage the success of students from working-
class ethic minority and immigrant backgrounds, 
such as not giving grades to students until the 8th 
grade, conducting lessons in German, Turkish, and 
English, and recruiting a high proportion of 
immigrant teachers. In this way, it seems that the 
educational success of Turkish students from 
immigrant families has been increased through 
different methods. For example, the recruitment of 
migrant teachers is a bridge between Turkish and 
German cultures for students and in this sense 
encourages teachers to play a cross-cultural 
advisory role. The fact that three languages 
are spoken in the school and that parents' meetings 
can be done in the family’s mother tongue reduce the 
shock experienced by students in the transition 
from home to school.

Giving marks after a certain grade keeps students' 
confidence higher. As an alternative to the grading 
system, NOG teachers give students feedback on 
their performance. In addition, with organizations 
such as class councils, students are encouraged to 
constantly discuss and develop the school's 
education system.

Thanks to these educational policies in NOG, the 
students in the school do not perceive the school as 
a discriminatory institution. In discussing his 
interviews with students, Çelik noted that the 
students do not see themselves in a position 
opposite to their environment and therefore 
underlined that the differences between the home 
environment and the school environment were 
reduced for the students. Through the policies 
observed, the institutional habitus of the school 
contributes to an inclusive education model that 
increases children’s self-confidence and their sense 
of belonging within the school system. In this way, 
the children of immigrant families are closer to the 
child-rearing practices seen in the middle-class 
family model, and the skills they cannot gain in the 
family environment are gained at the school.

In Kanarya Secondary School, it is seen that the 
opposite methods of education are followed 
compared to NOG. Institutional habitus is very 
different here. For example, the teachers at the 
school are not happy to work in this school, and 
many teachers look forward to the completion of 
their one-year contracts. This lowers the quality of 
teacher-provided education and is one of the most 
negative factors among children. In a school 
predominantly constituted by students from 
Kurdish immigrant families, teachers sometimes 
may have a hostile attitude towards Kurdish 
students because they are provided adequate 
support for some critical interpersonal skills, such 
as how to contact teachers with minority children. 
Both sides are left alone in this system because 
there is no institutional habitus logic that supports 
the students as well as the teachers. This is a factor 
that consolidates in the lack of students’ sense of 
belonging to the school. The school environment is 
a completely different world from the home 
environment for these students. The severity of the 
shock that students are experiencing during the 
transition from home to school is worsening. This 
school system based on mutual insecurities raises 
problems in the school, and the students become 
more and more introverted. The sense of restraint 
that Lareau mentions in working-class children is 
also evident here, and the school’s institutional 
habitus reinforces this sentiment. From all these 
angles, there is a chasm between Kanarya 
Secondary School and NOG in terms of 
institutional habitus.

Çelik ended his speech with his policy 
recommendations regarding the educational system 
in Turkey. Drawing attention to the increasing 
number of Syrian students in Turkish schools in 
recent years, Çelik emphasized the necessity of a 
system that highlights multiculturalism in public 
schools and from which students can positively 
accept their family values in an education setting. 
In addition to suggesting that teachers from the 
minority or immigrant groups should be recruited 
for schools wherein minority or immigrant students 
study, Çelik also mentioned that the grading system 
could be delayed until a certain period in primary 
school. Çelik stated that grades are a reference 
point for children’s self-confidence and personality. 
Stating that the inclusive school model had to be 
pondered and that the languages and cultures of the 
students should be seen as positive values, Çelik 
concluded that further workshops and studies 
should be conducted.