The Price of Child Care: Middle-Class Religious Mothers Navigating the ECEC Field in 2020s Istanbul

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Declaration of Originality

The intellectual content of this dissertation, which has been written by me and for which I take full responsibility, is my own, original work, and it has not been previously or concurrently submitted elsewhere for any other examination or degree of higher education. The sources of all paraphrased and quoted materials, concepts, and ideas are fully cited, and the admissible contributions and assistance of others with respect to the conception of the work as well as to linguistic expression are explicitly acknowledged herein.

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Abstract

The Price of Child Care: Middle-Class Religious Mothers Navigating the ECEC Field in 2020s Istanbul

Ayşe Meryem Gürpınar Akbulut, Doctoral Candidate at the Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History at Boğaziçi University, 2025

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This study examines the structure of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) field in Türkiye through a qualitative case study conducted in Istanbul. It is based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 50 women, including parents, teachers, and school managers, combined with participant observation in the field. It explores how middle-income, highly educated, and religious mothers navigate the complex and stratified ECEC landscape, negotiating limited economic resources while pursuing aspirations related to both their children's education and their own cultural tastes. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, this study critically analyzes the political and economic dynamics that structure the ECEC field and examines how economic, cultural, and social capital shape parental choices in interaction with institutional structures. Focusing on two key themes, social class and religious habitus, it shows that cultural capital, shaped by education and participation in the cultural field, produces divergent effects when intersecting with these themes. On the one hand, cultural capital contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities through middle-class maternal practices within the uneven ECEC structure, shaped by limited public provision and growing privatization. On the other hand, it reshapes pedagogical orientations within the diverse structure of religious habitus, facilitating transformation in educational practices and expectations.

90,000 words

Özet

Çocuk Bakımının Bedeli: 2020'ler İstanbul'unda Orta Sınıf Dindar Annelerin EÇEB Alanındaki Deneyimleri

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Doçent Berna Yazıcı, Tez Danışmanı

Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki erken çocukluk eğitimi ve bakımı (EÇEB) alanının yapısını, İstanbul'da yürütülen nitel bir vaka çalışması aracılığıyla incelemektedir. Araştırma, veliler, öğretmenler ve okul yöneticilerinden oluşan 50 kadın katılımcıyla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine mülakatlara ve sahadaki katılımlı gözlemlere dayanmaktadır. Orta gelirli, yüksek eğitimli ve dindar annelerin, sınırlı ekonomik kaynaklarını yönetirken çocuklarının eğitimiyle ilgili beklentilerinin yanı sıra kendi kültürel beğenilerini de gözeterek, bu karmaşık ve tabakalaşmış EÇEB alanında nasıl yol aldıkları araştırılmaktadır. Çalışma, Bourdieu'nün alan teorisinden yararlanarak, EÇEB alanını yapılandıran siyasal ve ekonomik dinamikleri analiz etmekte ve ekonomik, kültürel ve sosyal sermayenin ebeveyn tercihlerini kurumsal yapılarla etkileşim içinde nasıl şekillendirdiğini incelemektedir. Araştırma, sosyal sınıf ve dini habitus olmak üzere iki temel temaya odaklanmış, eğitim düzeyi ve kültürel alana katılım yoluyla biçimlenen kültürel sermayenin bu temalarla etkileşiminin farklı sonuçlar doğurduğunu göstermektedir. Kültürel sermaye, bir yandan, sınırlı kamu hizmeti ve artan özelleştirmeyle şekillenen eşitsiz EÇEB yapısı içinde, orta sınıf annelik pratikleri aracılığıyla toplumsal eşitsizliklerin yeniden üretimine katkıda bulunmaktadır. Öte yandan, dini habitusun yekpare olmayan yapısı içinde pedagojik yönelimleri etkilemekte, eğitimsel pratiklerde ve beklentilerde dönüşüme olanak tanımaktadır.

90.000 kelime

To all children,
whose sole equality
is their innocence.

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Glossary of Non-English Terms

Bed-i Besmele	A ceremonial event for initiation into Qur'an education
Bendir	A traditional frame drum
Ebru	The traditional Turkish art of paper marbling
Hafız	Person who has memorized the entire Qur'an
Hatim	The complete recitation of the Qur'an
İmam-Hatip	Religious vocational schools
İrtica	Idealizing backward order
Kandil	Holy nights in Islam
Kızılay	The Turkish Red Crescent
Maarif	Education in Ottoman Turkish
Siyer	Biography of Prophet Muhammad
Sıbyan mektebi	Traditional schools where young children received basic religious and literacy education.
Yerli Malı Haftası	Domestic Goods Week

Abbreviations and Acronyms

AÇEV	Mother Child Education Foundation
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ERG	Education Reform Initiative
IMM	Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality
JDP	Justice and Development Party
KPSS	Public Personnel Selection Examination
MoFSS	Ministry of Family and Social Services
MoNE	Ministry of National Education
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRA	Presidency of Religious Affairs
RPP	Republican People's Party
TL	Turkish Lira
TÜİK	Turkish Statistical Institute
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

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1

Introduction

The journey of this dissertation began when I had to send my son to a day care center outside my *habitus*. This encounter revealed the multifaceted mechanism of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) field in Türkiye. The ECEC field is mutually constructed by diverse institutional structures, each operating under its own regulations and rules, and by a variety of agents driven by their distinct lifestyles and preferences. This dissertation aims to analyze the ECEC site from an insider's perspective, highlighting how unequal outcomes are collaboratively shaped by the dynamics of both the supply and demand sides. It also seeks to demonstrate the role of this early stage of education in the transmission of capital and identity. My personal experiences as a parent sparked my interest and engagement with this field of study.

My son was two and a half years old when I started taking Ph.D. courses. Before that, when I was writing my master's thesis, I occasionally relied on the support of my family members, primarily women, to take care of my baby. However, I was no longer willing to constantly try to organize and solve the care work in intimate relationships. I needed a more institutional solution, and he was now old enough to start school. When I started looking for a suitable school, I also entered the preschool education market in Istanbul. However, finding a school for a child under three years old was not easy. First of all, there was no public institution providing services for this age at that time (2016), which we, as parents who are students ourselves, would have preferred. The

private schools in our neighborhood also usually had a three-year age limit. Day care centers affiliated with the Ministry of Family and Social Services, which provide care from infancy, were also not widespread and accessible to me. We didn't contact the more prestigious private schools and ask for an age limit since we could not afford their high fees anyway. Finally, thanks to a professor at the university I was attending at the time, we could find a school that would accept my son. The principal of the school was my professor's acquaintance; he was sending his daughter there; it was in the same district as our house; my friend's house was right next to it for emergencies, and since it had just opened, the fees were more affordable than those of other private schools. This is how our family problem was solved for the time being. Yet this is how I witnessed that there are not enough services in the market, especially in the public sector, to meet the needs of families.

Why did I feel that this school was outside my *habitus*, i.e., socially constructed internalized dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984)? First, as the daughter of civil servant parents, I had never attended a private school. My mother was working but managed our care needs by taking unpaid leave, getting help from relatives, or hiring a babysitter during early childhood. Later on, I attended public schools out of necessity, but at the same time, I valued them as places where I could connect with many people from society. In my eyes, private schools were places where grades could be bought for spoiled children of wealthy families. For this reason, I never thought I would become a private school parent. However, when I became a mother myself, my demand to provide an institutional school for my son, whom I had mostly taken care of for two and a half years, could not be met by public service standards. In addition to the lack of public provision, I, as a new, anxious mother, wanted a level of care and sensitivity for my very young son that public schools, which had a poor-quality image in my mind, could not provide. Yes, I had survived in public schools, but my little boy was more precious than I was. Second, my religious *habitus* did not fit with the secular identity of the school. In fact, I was raised in a secular education system; my family provided me with alternative religious education. Additionally, I did not demand religious education for my son at an early age, but still, a school more aligned with our lifestyle would have made us feel more comfortable. As a result, depending on the needs and

preferences of his parents and the structural conditions of the ECEC market, my son attended for four years in three different schools and completed his preschool education, lasting as long as a bachelor's degree.

As in my own experience, the type of early childhood education a child receives is determined both by the services available and by the families' preferences, shaped by their social backgrounds, cultural dispositions, and material resources. While access to these education and care services occurs unevenly, the ECEC field also witnesses conflicts of interest and power struggles among different segments of society seeking to assert their class positions, values, and pedagogical ideals, in ways aligned with their own *habitus*. In line with these mutual dynamics, the dissertation is titled "The Price of Child Care," pointing to this intersection between the demands of families and the institutional supply of early education services within a competitive and stratified market. In a literal sense, price, the intersection of supply and demand, refers to the rising financial cost of accessing early childhood education in urban Türkiye, particularly for families navigating limited resources and high aspirations. At the same time, the word carries a broader sociological meaning, which is social cost (*bedel* in Turkish), capturing the social consequences arising from these interactions between parents and institutions. These consequences include the reproduction of class-based inequalities, shifts in pedagogical norms, and broader cultural transformations. Thus, the "price" of child care is paid not only in monetary terms by families but also in symbolic, political, and social terms, paid collectively by society through the reshaping of values, hierarchies, and educational futures.

This dissertation investigates the structure of the early childhood education and care field in Türkiye through a qualitative case study based in Istanbul. It explores how middle-income, highly educated, and predominantly religious mothers[1] navigate this complex and stratified landscape, negotiating limited economic resources while pursuing aspirations related not only to

[1] This dissertation focuses specifically on mothers' preschool choices, since parenting is a gendered responsibility most often placed on mothers during children's early years. However, throughout the text I will also use the term "parent" to refer to denote mothers in their role as the official school guardian (*veli*), rather than to refer collectively to both mothers and fathers (*ebeveyn*).

their children's education but also to specific cultural tastes and identities. Grounded in a relational sociology of education approach and drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, the study examines how various forms of capital, i.e., economic, cultural, and social, shape parental choices and interact with institutional structures and practices within the diverse terrain of ECEC.

This theoretical lens allows for an analysis of how actors navigate intersecting relations of power, identity, and legitimacy in the everyday processes of early childhood education and how these interactions contribute to the reproduction or transformation of social structures. Two key themes emerged from the data. First, social class, reflected in the classed anxieties and preferences of highly educated, middle-income mothers, not peculiar to the religious segment, was expressed through practices of distinction aimed at differentiating themselves from other social groups. These practices illustrate how class-based habitus and, most significantly, the deployment of cultural capital influence educational decision-making and contribute to the reproduction of social class positions. Second, the theme of religious value transmission revealed parents' deep concern with passing on moral and faith-based values to the next generation, a concern rooted in their religious habitus and accompanied by sensitivity to pedagogical appropriateness. Here, too, cultural capital plays a central role, enabling parents to exercise this sensitivity and distinguish their approaches from more traditional or conventional models of religious education. While the first theme demonstrates how cultural capital reinforces existing social hierarchies, the second theme points to its transformative potential within the religious and educational domains. In light of these themes, early childhood education emerges as a critical site of sociocultural reproduction and identity formation, where social agents and institutional structures interact in dynamic and relational ways.

The research questions guiding this dissertation are structured to move from a broad exploration of parental navigation within the ECEC field to more specific inquiries into the roles of capital and field dynamics, and finally toward a further sociological reflection. First, how do middle-income, highly educated, and religious mothers navigate the early childhood education and care field in Istanbul? How does socio-economic habitus, through the possession and activation of types of capital, particularly cultural, shape parental

preferences and decisions regarding early childhood education? In what ways does religious habitus influence engagement with the ECEC field, particularly at its intersection with the political field? How does cultural capital enable transformations within the religious field through parental strategies in early education? Finally, in what ways does the ECEC field function as a site of both social reproduction and transformation in contemporary Turkish society?

In light of these questions, and through close empirical engagement in the field, this dissertation asserts that a social site, such as the early childhood education and care field, can only be understood through a relational perspective, one that considers the dynamic interplay between structure and agency and positioning of actors in relation to one another within the field of power. It further argues that cultural capital can play a dual role as it enables middle-class parents to reproduce social class boundaries through practices of distinction in the ECEC field. It also transforms religious education by reframing value transmission in pedagogically and culturally redefined terms. These processes reveal how the ECEC field operates both as a site of class consolidation and as a space where religious identities reshape the transmission of values within the dynamics of the political field.

This dissertation contributes to the expanding literature on early childhood education, class formation, and religious subjectivity by bringing them into dialogue through the lens of Bourdieu's field theory. While some research has approached parental choice in education as a rational, market-based decision driven primarily by access or preference (Chubb & Moe, 1990), this study builds on sociological work that emphasizes how educational decisions are shaped by class-based habitus, cultural capital, and symbolic struggles (Ball, 2005; Vincent et al., 2008; Vincent & Ball, 2006).

Within the Turkish context, a growing body of literature addresses symbolic conflicts in education through the lens of identity. Particular attention has been paid to hegemonic struggles along the secular–religious axis in the sphere of educational policies, beginning with the transformations in the 1980s and continuing under the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which has ruled for more than two decades with a blend of Islamist and neoliberal orientations (Eroler, 2019; Kaplan, 2006; Ozgur, 2012). Kandiyoti & Emanet (2017) see "education as battleground," where the combined influences of

Islamization and neoliberalism are increasingly visible. Studies document the expansion of state-supported religiosity in primary education (Karlıdağ-Dennis et al., 2018), the gendered outcomes of religious educational policies at various levels (Cin et al., 2018; Emanet, 2018), the legal disputes triggered by compulsory religious education (Özgül, 2019), and the identity debates surrounding the state's aim for "creating a pious generation" (Lüküslü, 2016). More recently, Kolluoğlu & Dinçer (2023) bring a social class dimension to the discussion of identity conflicts in education, showing how secular and religious upper-middle-class families exhibit converging consumption styles and educational concerns, yet diverge in their access to and use of institutional resources. Their study focuses on parental school choice, which they identify as a critical blind spot in the Turkish education literature, one that deserves greater attention. Extending their call, this dissertation emphasizes the significance of parental school choice for analyzing political dynamics and power structures in education, with a particular focus on preschool, a stage that has thus far been largely neglected in educational research. Furthermore, this research demonstrates that at this stage of education, where marketization policies are particularly effective, middle-class religious families do not differ from other families in the same class position in terms of their pedagogical preferences or in the class-reproducing attitudes they adopt. At the same time, while highlighting points of divergence across religious-secular identities with respect to educational content, the findings point to the existence of gray areas that contrast with a rigid binary division. This study also points to the fact that families with different habitus converge around the shared goal of securing early identity formation. It contributes to the literature that argues the structure of the marketized early education and care sector, which leaves responsibility to mothers, produces gendered outcomes, and also draws attention to the relationship between the experience of mothering and class position.

I introduce certain conceptual contributions that emerge from the empirical analysis. First is the notion of *anxious mothering*, which expands the idea of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) by emphasizing the emotional labor, mental load, and heightened sense of responsibility middle-class mothers bear, not only for their children's well-being and development, but for maintaining their own psychological well-being. And second is the concept of *the entrapment of*

the middle class, which captures the structural tension experienced by culturally aspirational but economically constrained families navigating a competitive educational market. Third, I categorized the attitudes of religious families and educators toward the official curriculum into three types, showing that the field is not strictly binary: 1. *avoidant/selective engagement*, where content is completely avoided or limited to what aligns with their values; 2. *reluctant incorporation*, where content is accepted out of necessity rather than conviction; and 3. *embracing integration*, where both religious and Atatürkist content are willingly combined. Therefore, the study extends relational and field-based approaches to education by showing how religious and political fields intersect within the everyday practices of early schooling in contemporary Türkiye. In doing so, it offers an empirically grounded and theoretically supported account of how ECEC functions as a site of social reproduction and change, symbolic power, and identity formation.

In this introduction chapter, I first discuss the significance of the key elements that shape the research field, namely, early childhood education and care (ECEC), middle-class practices, and religious habitus, which provide a brief overview of the theoretical framework that guides the analysis. I then provide a summary of the methodological approach and conclude with the outline of the dissertation's chapters.

§ 1.1 The Significance of Early Childhood Education and Care

The terminology used to describe institutional services providing care and education for children before compulsory schooling, such as child care, preschool, nursery, day care, or *crèche*, varies significantly across contexts, and often reflects differences in the primary intention of the service, whether custodial care aimed at ensuring children's safety and basic needs, or educational provision aimed at fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development, as well as the age group served, with some terms typically referring to services for infants and toddlers (0–3) and others to programs for preschool-aged children (3–6). Thus, this lack of standardization poses a conceptual challenge for the ECEC field and comparative research (Lloyd & Penn, 2014; OECD, 2017; Ünver et al., 2018). International bodies have played a significant role in

shaping this terminology, particularly through large-scale comparative reviews of early childhood systems. The OECD, for example, deliberately uses the integrated term early childhood education and care (ECEC) to reflect the fact that member states' systems may encompass both educational provision, aimed at enhancing children's development and preparing them for formal schooling, and child care services, which provide supervision and care while parents are at work (OECD, 2001). The European Union employs the same terminology (Plantenga & Remery, 2015), whereas UNESCO and other agencies often use early childhood care and education (ECCE) in majority-world contexts, or early childhood development (ECD) when emphasizing healthcare as part of the early childhood spectrum (UNESCO, 2006). National contexts also vary, as in the Netherlands, "child care" refers exclusively to non-parental care for young children of employed parents, while in England, the term has historically referred both to child care for working parents and to publicly funded early education (Lloyd & Penn, 2014). This variation underscores the need for clarity in specifying what forms of provision are included in a given study.

I use the term "Early Childhood Education and Care" (ECEC) in this dissertation to refer to the institutional provision of care and education services for children aged 0–6. Unless otherwise stated, the term "child care" will be used in this narrow institutional sense, as in the title. In the Turkish context, ECEC operates as a split system in terms of both curricula and governing authority (OECD, 2017). Provision for children aged 3–6, formally defined as "preschool or pre-primary education" (*okul öncesi eğitim*), falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). In practice, however, public preschools primarily serve children aged 4–6, as the establishment of classes for three-year-olds is constrained by limited resources. For younger children aged 0–3, provision is delivered mainly through "day care centers" (*gündüz bakımevleri*) or "crèches" (*kreş*), which also include some pre-primary classes (ages 3–6) and fall under the authority of the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS). In addition, some district and metropolitan municipalities, such as the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM), operate day care centers. At the same time, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) provides Qur'an courses for children aged 4–6. I aim to include all types of

institutions operating in my research site, Istanbul, as they collectively constitute the structure of the supply side of the ECEC field.

The importance attached to ECEC has grown significantly over recent decades globally. International organizations such as the OECD, UNICEF, and the World Bank promote ECEC not only as an educational matter but also as an essential component of human development. ECEC is widely recognized as a critical stage for establishing the foundations of lifelong learning, skills acquisition, and overall well-being. High-quality provision is viewed as a powerful instrument for promoting equity and inclusion, as well as for enhancing children's socio-emotional competencies and readiness for school (OECD, 2023a). A broad body of literature identifies three interrelated goals for ECEC provision: (1) pedagogical aims related to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development; (2) protection and care, ensuring children's well-being and safety; and (3) enabling women's economic participation through child care support (Scheiwe & Willekens, 2009). The discovery of the role of early education in children's long-term development also increased the preference for formal center-based care vis-à-vis home-based care (Lister, 2003). Not only personal academic achievement, but investing in ECEC is supposed to bring social and economic benefits, such as reducing crime and labor inactivity in the future (Gallagher, 2013). The high rate of return to human capital investment is formulated as every dollar invested in preschool programs has a much higher return than a dollar invested at any other stage of the education system (Heckman, 2006). As a result, ECEC is now widely framed as both a social right and a strategic investment in human capital.

Türkiye's position in the global ECEC landscape is significant. Compared to OECD averages, women's employment and enrolment rates for children aged 0–3 remain low. World Bank (2013) published a report specifically on Türkiye a decade ago, offering recommendations to expand and improve the ECEC sector. Enrollment rates have risen significantly in recent years for five-year-olds, primarily due to targeted state policies to expand pre-primary education. However, this expansion has been uneven. For children aged two and under, Türkiye ranks last among OECD countries (OECD, 2023b), due to a combination of insufficient service provision and prevailing social norms that care should be provided by mothers or close relatives until at least age two

(World Bank, 2015). Public investment has been concentrated on the year immediately before primary school, while care for children aged 0–3 has been left mainly to the private sector.

Additionally, significant public resources for ECEC in the 4–6 age range have been channeled to the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) for programs that combine early childhood education with religious instruction. This dual reliance on private provision and religiously oriented public provision has been interpreted as a manifestation of the intertwining of neoliberalism and conservatism, or the "religionalization" of education (Aksoy & Eren Deniz, 2018; Dedeoğlu & Şahankaya Adar, 2022). Nonetheless, understanding the dynamics of the ECEC field in Türkiye requires incorporating the perspectives and strategies of parents, a gap this dissertation seeks to address.

§ 1.2 Middle-Class Practices in Education

In Türkiye, middle-income groups are the social segment most actively engaged with education in general, as reflected in their higher proportional spending on educational expenses compared to both lower- and upper-income groups (Acar et al., 2016). Similarly, the ECEC field is not independent of social class since it has yet to reach saturation or an advanced stage in serving all age groups and socio-economic segments. In addition, limited public provision is supplemented by private sector services, which inherently shape access according to class order (Akkan et al., 2023). However, participation in ECEC services is influenced not only by families' economic status (Agirdag et al., 2015) but also by the family's education level, especially of the mother (AÇEV & ERG, 2017). Children from economically disadvantaged families, as well as those from families with lower educational attainment, tend to show lower levels of participation. This indicates that families with a certain income level and higher educational attainment constitute the leading current demand group that plays a significant role in the ECEC market.

Identifying these families based on their income and education levels as middle-class is challenging. As a social status, the "middle class" category is widely used and criticized for its ambiguity. Defining a particular segment of society as middle class raises questions such as: What is the appropriate

income range? Which level of education is sufficient? And which occupations should be included?

Almost all of my informants are highly educated, holding B.A. or M.A. degrees, and have sufficient income to afford a private school for at least one child. Nevertheless, rather than outright assigning them a middle-class identity, I focused on tracing middle-class practices. Such practices require not only economic resources but also a set of concerns that go beyond meeting basic needs, reflecting a sense of taste and aspiration toward non-essential or discretionary consumption. They also depend on the ability to mobilize relevant forms of capital to act on these concerns across different social fields. In the field of early education, parental middle-class practices often involve child-centered pedagogical orientations; attention to the aesthetics and quality of physical environments; sensitivity to the language and discourse used within institutions; a desire to distinguish themselves from those perceived as less informed; and the strategic mobilization of their available capital to access preferred schools. In this context, cultural capital plays a pivotal role by enabling parents to evaluate educational quality, shaping their aspirations for their children, and positioning them advantageously within the stratified ECEC field.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has often been interpreted narrowly as familiarity with "highbrow" aesthetic culture, as Lareau & Weininger (2003) argue, which limits the analytical scope of cultural research. They propose a broader understanding that highlights the "micro-interactional processes" through which individuals strategically deploy knowledge, skills, and competencies in ways that align with institutionalized evaluation standards (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 597). Reay (2004a) supports this expanded view, emphasizing that cultural capital provides individualized, self-interested "middle-class parents" with "self-confidence and a sense of entitlement" that they and their children are inherently deserving of specific advantages and outcomes (p. 77).

However, Irwin & Elley (2011) caution against oversimplifying class-based educational behavior as seen in Lareau's concept of "concerted cultivation", which assumes a divergence between middle-class and working-class parenting practices, noting that families assigned to the same class position may behave differently depending on complex contextual factors. In contrast to these

more rigid class categorizations, they provide empirical evidence that educational preferences can involve both intra-class diversity and inter-class fluidity. Therefore, rather than assigning fixed class identities to families, it is more analytically useful to frame their behaviors in terms of middle-class practices. Referring to patterns shaped by possession and activation of cultural (and other) capital allows for a more flexible understanding of educational preferences, without reducing families to rigid class categories. Throughout this dissertation, when I refer to "middle-class parents" for ease of expression, I use this term to describe families engaging in middle-class practices, rather than making absolute claims about their class position.

It is necessary to delineate what constitutes these parental middle-class practices in the contemporary landscape. Parental middle-class practices are shaped by a particular set of values, strategies, and emotional orientations that go beyond material indicators such as income or occupation. However, parenthood is a deeply gendered field, evident in the predominance of mothers as the primary actors in parental decision-making and engagement (Arendell, 2000; Miller, 2005). This gendered situation is particularly pronounced in early childhood as mothers bear the majority of caring responsibilities during this period, which explains why the parent informants in this study consisted of mothers. Therefore, the term *maternal* middle-class practices may be more appropriate here.

These maternal practices are grounded in what I call *anxious mothering*, which builds upon but also departs from Hays' (1996) concept of *intensive mothering*. Like intensive mothering, anxious mothering is child-centered and emotionally demanding, characterized by a continual search for the "best" educational environment and a persistent sense of responsibility for shaping a child's future. The pursuit of "right" care, as Skeggs (1997) notes, "generates enormous anxieties, doubt and guilt" (p. 72) for mothers. Within the context of ECEC, decisions about whether, when, and how to engage in early education often evoke multiple layers of guilt for anxious mothers: towards themselves about their competence as parents, towards society for being judged, and towards their children's behavior in social settings. Additionally, anxious mothering also reflects a shift toward recognizing the mother's own emotional and psychological health; unlike the intensive model of parenting framed as

complete self-sacrifice, this approach also encompasses the attitudes of contemporary mothers who place importance on preserving their own mental well-being, even if sometimes for the sake of sustaining positive and engaged mothering for their children. In this respect, ECEC services are not only a site where mothers closely scrutinize and evaluate schools in terms of their pedagogical approach, the teacher's attitude, the safety of the physical environment, etc., because they care about their children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. It also functions as an institutional support that alleviates mothers' daily caregiving responsibilities, offers psychological relief, and provides both the breathing space and renewed motivation needed to sustain engaged parenting.

Maternal middle-class practices are characterized by being highly structured and planned, often beginning before the child is born, as choice and control have become more dominant in decisions about childbearing (Miller, 2005). While "the number of births is declining, […] the importance of the child is rising" (Beck, 1992, p. 118), many parents approach their child's upbringing as a carefully managed project. This includes choices about nutrition, social environment, schooling, and extracurricular activities, emphasizing individual development, and social and cognitive skills from an early age, a practice Lareau (2011) terms *concerted cultivation*. Another feature of these mothers is being involved, taking on active, participatory roles, mobilizing various forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) to identify, access, and secure advantageous positions, educational opportunities in the ECEC context, that align with their aspirations. A further defining characteristic is the emphasis on involving the child in decision-making processes. Rather than simply imposing decisions, parents often seek to persuade their children, encouraging self-expression and fostering a sense of individual agency. This approach reflects a broader middle-class value of the sense of entitlement, the belief that one deserves specific opportunities and outcomes, which, as Reay (2004) notes, is actively taught and transmitted to the next generation, including through performing within educational settings.

Therefore, these middle-class practices require significant investments of time, emotional labor, and intellectual effort; as well as the development of specific strategies when financial resources fall short of aspirations, a

condition I refer to as the *entrapment of the middle class*. As such, parental middle-class practices function as both a marker of class distinction and a mechanism for the reproduction of stratification, placing children in advantageous positions while reinforcing the parents' own social standing.

Focusing on middle-class practices rather than middle-class identity is an analytical choice I employ to account for both intraclass diversity and interclass fluidity. Vertical diversity among social groups can be observed on the economic plane, based on income and wealth, and on the cultural plane, based on educational attainment. However, horizontal differences on the cultural plane, in terms of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or ideology, are also significant. In this context, religious habitus, as a form of horizontal cultural capital, constitutes another key analytical factor in this study, the significance of which I will address in the next section.

§ 1.3 Religious Habitus and Value Transmission

Religion is a constitutive element of the cultural field. In Bourdieusian analysis, it, like any other domain, is approached through the lens of power relations and symbolic violence (Swartz, 1996). Yet, before assuming a vertical stratification structure, religion also operates as a way of life (McKinnon, 2017), which positions it horizontally within the social sphere. While Bourdieu's (1991a) own work highlights religious capital as a resource that can be accumulated and mobilized within the structuring of the religious field, such as within the institutional framework of the church, a parallel analysis can be applied to the Sunni Islamic context in Türkiye, where similar forms of capital may emerge through religious institutions and figures.

However, my focus is not on the religious field in itself, but on how religious dispositions intersect with the ECEC field. For this reason, I use the concept of religious habitus rather than religious capital. Here, religious habitus refers to the embodied dispositions and practices of actors who self-identify through religious commitments, maintain certain religious sensibilities, and prioritize transmitting these values through intergenerational instruction. While mentioning their religious habitus, I do not attempt to measure the religiosity of my interviewees drawing on a predefined religious capital, but I

describe them as practicing and observant Muslims based on their regular fulfilment of basic prayers, adoption of visible signs of religious identity (such as wearing a headscarf), and willingness to pass on religious values to their children. What, then, is the particular relationship between religious habitus and the ECEC field? It is related to the fact that service providers, recipients, and institutions shaped by this habitus occupy a more prominent position within the legal structure of education in Türkiye.

Responsibility for early childhood education and care in Türkiye is distributed among the state, the market, and the family, reflecting the characteristics of the applied welfare and gender regime (Dedeoğlu & Şahankaya Adar, 2022). Public provision remains insufficient regarding the scope of target age groups, the length and flexibility of service hours, the quantity of available places, and the quality of provision. These limitations either load the early child care onto mostly women members of families or create opportunities for private providers to expand their presence in the field. These institutional gaps cannot be understood in isolation from the political field. In this space, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) emerged as a new and influential actor, offering low-cost religious education based on Sunni Islam beliefs for children aged 4–6. Funded by public resources, these courses are framed as meeting Muslim community demand but have also been interpreted and criticized as advancing a project of neoliberal conservatism, which contributing to the religionalization of education (Aksoy & Eren Deniz, 2018); or non-institutionalization, referring to erosion of formal state institutions (Dedeoğlu & Şahankaya Adar, 2022); or as institutional layering, where new institutions with distinct ideological orientations (PRA) are introduced alongside existing legitimate ones (MoNE)(Ertem, 2022). This debate points to a shift in the balance in "the field of power," both in determining where public funding is channeled and the content of the education that can be provided legally.

However, PRA courses are not the only site where religion enters the ECEC landscape. Changes in the political and cultural climate have enabled certain private preschools from religious habitus, with varying positions on the fee scale, to include religious instruction in their curricula. Among them are organizations that claim to integrate religious education with pedagogical ECEC models, appealing to parents who want to combine faith-based upbringing

with modern educational approaches. The diversity among schools and courses providing religious education indicates that the religious habitus is not monolithic. Such diversity is not solely structured along the economic axis, implying low-cost PRA courses vs. high-fee religious private schools. However, it is also observed in terms of cultural capital, which is particularly acquired through educational attainment and access to other cultural resources, and provides a child-centered pedagogical orientation. These differences shape how providers design religious ECEC programs and how parents evaluate and select them. While the expansion of early religious education has been mainly driven by transformations in the political field, understanding this phenomenon requires examining how actors with both educated middle-class practices and a religious habitus navigate the ECEC field.

§ 1.4 Conclusion

This dissertation begins from recognizing that early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Türkiye is a contested and stratified *field* in the Bourdieusian sense, in which the role of state, market, and family intersect with political, cultural, and class dynamics. My own trajectory into the ECEC field, as both a researcher and a parent, highlighted that the field is relationally constructed, where structural conditions shaped by state policies, legal frameworks, and institutional capacities intertwine with parental agency, expressed through habitus preferences, strategies, and the mobilization of their possessed capitals. Within this relational space of ECEC, questions of cultural capital, religious habitus, and middle-class practices become analytically significant in contemporary Türkiye.

To reveal both sides of the ECEC field, providers and recipients, this research is a qualitative field study adopting ethnographic methods. The analysis draws on legal documents, policy texts, and reports from international organizations to establish the institutional and regulatory framework of the field. It is further supported by sustained observation in preschool settings and personal communications in these environments, which offered insight into everyday practices, interactions, and unspoken norms. The core of the empirical material consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 23 service

providers, including teachers and managers at preschools or courses under MoNE, MoFSS, IMM, and PRA, as well as 27 parents whose children attend these types of institutions. In addition, a semi-structured focus group was conducted with five parents from the same private kindergarten, enabling the exploration of shared experiences and divergent perspectives within a single institutional setting. All qualitative data were coded and analyzed by applying thematic analysis using MAXQDA software.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2, *Theoretical Framework*, reviews major approaches within the sociology of education, situating the study within a relational perspective. Drawing primarily on Bourdieu's field theory, conceived as a "game" with rules, stakes, and players, the chapter introduces other key analytical tools of capital and habitus. It also incorporates Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing to analyze the structuring of education and pedagogical relations. The chapter concludes by explaining how the main themes emerging from the data, social class and religious value transmission, are conceptualized with the analytical lenses of middle-class practices and religious habitus. Chapter 3, *Methodology*, details the research design and methodological approach, outlining the ethnographic orientation of the study. It describes the selection of participants and provides demographic information about informants, including parents, teachers, and managers. It also reflects on the researcher's positionality, both as an academic and as a parent navigating the ECEC field, and discusses the data collection techniques and the thematic analysis process conducted with MAXQDA. Chapter 4, *Setting the Game*, inspired by the field theory metaphor of a "game," maps the institutional structure of ECEC in Türkiye. It identifies the leading actors, such as responsible ministries (MoNE and MoFSS), municipal authorities (IMM), and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA), and outlines the services they provide. The chapter shows how uneven the structure of the field is. Chapter 5, *Classed Performance at Play*, examines the middle-class practices of informant mothers, focusing on their emotional orientations toward mothering, classed preferences in ECEC, and attitudes of distinction. It also explores how mothers manage the entrapment of the middle class, the tension between high cultural aspirations and limited economic resources, through the strategic mobilization of capital. Chapter 6, *Passing the Value Cards*,

analyzes how informants with a religious habitus frame the religious values they wish to transmit to the next generation. It examines how the political field shapes religious education in ECEC and how the content and style of religious instruction shift in relation to changes in the cultural field, including the rise of pedagogical concerns and the psychological turn in parenting. Finally, Chapter 7, *Conclusion*, synthesizes the findings to demonstrate that this application of field theory here serves as an example of how an educational field can function as a stage for both social reproduction and transformation, both of which, I argue, fundamentally depend on cultural capital. It discusses the study's main contributions alongside its limitations, suggesting directions for future research that could enrich both specific analyses and broader research designs of the ECEC field.

2

Theoretical Framework

As a multifaceted sphere, education has been analyzed within the framework of numerous disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, political science, economics, and pedagogy. The role of educational institutions in sustaining and transforming social structures, creating cultural encounters, and transmitting ideological attitudes has made education a pivotal field of sociological analysis. Especially in the last half-century, increasing and diversifying studies in this field have led to the emergence and development of the sociology of education as an essential sub-discipline (Hallinan, 2000). This subfield is influenced by the theoretical transformations occurring in the main field, i.e., sociology, and it is also divided into many subgroups in terms of methodology, local context, etc. Therefore, it is not a completed and uniform discipline; instead, "sociology of education is a construction" (Apple, 1996, p. 125) that has "dynamic and located" settings (Ball, 2004, p. 1). The mapping of all branches of this complex sub-discipline is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, mentioning two main branches by drawing attention to their differences would be meaningful in showing which perspective I take here. The functionalist and critical-relational theoretical approaches that have influenced the sociology of education will be briefly discussed in the next section. Then, it will be explained how to apply the critical-relational perspective to the research field of this dissertation, early childhood education and care.

§ 2.1 Theoretical Approaches in the Sociology of Education

First, functionalist theory analogizes the functioning of society to the biological functioning of the human body, with each part playing a crucial role. In this approach, the institutions of society, such as family, education, religion, politics, economy, and health care, are assumed to be made up of interdependent parts that work together. Each part contributes to the functioning of the whole society through necessary activities, maintaining order and consensus among individuals. Change in systems is seen as a process that helps the system to adapt to new conditions; such change is usually considered slow and evolutionary, avoiding disruption of the ongoing system. The education system is also considered critical for making society a cohesive and functioning whole. It is recognized that the first scientific analyses of education as a social institution were made by early sociologists such as Durkheim, who was the first sociologist to propose using a sociological approach to study education. His studies comprised analyses of certain relationships in the field of education, such as schools and other social institutions, education and social change, or schools and the functions of the social system (Ballantine et al., 2017).

While recognizing the critical role of the education system in making society a cohesive and functioning whole, the functionalist approach has been criticized for failing to acknowledge the diverse interests, ideologies, conflicting group values, and power differentials in different societies. Each subgroup may have its own educational agenda that serves its own interests, and functionalists do not adequately address this. This diversity adds a layer of complexity and richness to the field of sociology of education, making it worthy of deeper investigation.

Another criticism of the functionalist approach is its focus only on the inputs and outputs of education, regarding it as a "black box" and failing to analyze the education processes. It does not analyze the interactions between teachers and students or between students themselves, such as classroom dynamics (Ball, 2004). It also ignores the "content" of education, what and how it is taught (Halsey & Karabel, 1977, p. 11). However, individuals not only fulfill roles within this educational structure but also create and change these roles and dynamics, which functionalist studies do not focus on. It is argued that,

as a result, the status quo orientation of functionalism has prevented the field of sociology of education from advancing by adapting to ongoing social changes (Floud et al., 1958).

In response to these shortcomings, a "new sociology of education" emerged in the 1970s, particularly with the publication of *Knowledge and Control* (Young, 1971), which collected articles by sociologists such as Young, Bourdieu, and Bernstein (Lingard, 2023) and introduced a critical–relational perspective to the field. The new sociology of education, consisting of movements such as neo-Marxism, interactionism, and the sociology of knowledge, focused on processes of educational transmission. As Ball (2004) briefly mentions to the contribution of these subfields, Neo-Marxism drew attention to the reproduction of class relations within schools and classrooms and the relations between forms of schooling experience and the labor process; interactionism presented a way to explore the construction of the social identities of students and teachers and to generate descriptive explanations for the realization of social control and social choice in classrooms, through applying school-based ethnography; and sociology of knowledge, paying particular attention to the rules that shape the social construction of curricula and pedagogical practices, questioned subject and school knowledge. Theorists in this perspective, such as Bernstein and Bourdieu, advocate a holistic approach to education that combines macro-level analysis of institutions with micro-level analysis of interaction (Ballantine et al., 2017). Bernstein, for example, demonstrated this synthesis approach by integrating the macro-level class and power relations underlying educational systems and the micro-level interactional educational processes in schools with his linguistic code theory (Bernstein, 1996).

Bourdieu's significant contribution to this literature is that the forms of capital he identified (economic, cultural, and social capital) have become seminal tools in analyzing and understanding the field of education in depth (Bourdieu, 1986). Another prominent sociologist of education who comes from the Neo-Marxist vein and is worth mentioning in the context of this study is Apple, who has written major works on the content of education, i.e., curriculum and power relations. Apple (2019) proposes a "relational analysis" approach that sees social activity, including education, with regard to the

broader arrangements of institutions. According to this approach, social action, cultural and educational activities, and artifacts do not exist by their own substance and features, as the essentialist positivist approach claims. Instead, these phenomena acquire meaning according to the complex interconnections between them and their relationship to the ways in which society is organized and controlled. In other words, "the relations themselves are the defining characteristics" (Apple, 2019, p. 10). Through such an analysis, one can avoid "the substantialist fallacy, which assigns explanatory factors to variables" (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015, p. 18). In addition, it provides a bridge between structure and agency. Rather than treating institutions and individuals as separate explanatory factors, it emphasizes how agents' practices are shaped by structural contexts while also reproducing or transforming those contexts through their actions. Bourdieu is a key figure in developing this connection between macro-level structures and micro-level practices, and his concepts of field, habitus, and capital offer concrete tools to conduct a relational analysis, since they can analytically make sense of a complex set of relations. Moreover, these analysis tools can also be defined together on the theoretical ground they establish, not in an isolated way, their theoretician says (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Therefore, in this dissertation, the perspectives and tools of the relational approach, primarily the field, will be utilized to analyze the site of early childhood care and education. As mentioned, since they complement each other, it is necessary to mention them all briefly.

2.1.1 *The Field*

Bourdieu used the concept of the social field, *le champ*, for the first time in an article from his earlier writings on intellectual relations (Bourdieu, 1971; in Thomson, 2014). But before that, field theory was used in other disciplines, such as physics and natural philosophy, in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Replacing the old substance theory, modern field theory introduced a relational rather than an essentialist perspective on phenomena. According to Cassirer (1923; in Hilgers & Magnez, 2015), what characterizes modern science is precisely this shift from an essentialist way of thinking to a relational mode of thought. This relational epistemology later shaped the Gestalt theory used by Lewin in psychology, from which Passeron and Bourdieu derived the

concept of field (Passeron, 2003). Thus, beyond explaining human behavior, they introduced the concept to the analysis of social phenomena. Bourdieu developed his theory in a broad spectrum of domains, such as religion, science, culture, politics, and law (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). In his later work, education is among the fields in which he uses this term (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1996).

The field provides a way to analyze a social site with its circumstances, boundaries, and participants by presenting it as a game. Every social field has rules, like a game, where it is roughly clear which players in which positions or with which cards can make what type of moves and what the consequences of each move will be. However, unlike the game, the field is not produced deliberately and calculatedly, but follows the rules or regularities that are not precise and encoded. Individuals' economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital can be considered the cards in their hands. Some cards are valid in every game, and some cards gain value with reference to the rules of the game, which means, in other words, they are only effective when there is a game in which they can be used. This shows the requisite interconnection between the concepts of capital and field. The fact that players continue to play the game means an implicit acceptance of the rules and competition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

It is important to note that the binding effect between the game and the player is not unidirectional but reciprocal. In some cases, players can also have an impact on the game and change or revise its rules through their moves and strategies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The players' primary objective is to preserve or upgrade their position through capital accumulation. To mention four forms of capital that Bourdieu designated: "economic (money and assets); cultural (forms of knowledge, taste, aesthetic and cultural preferences, language); social (affiliations and networks) and symbolic (things which stand for all of the others and can be "exchanged" in other fields, e.g., credentials)" (Thomson, 2014, p. 67). Bourdieu (1996) even visualizes the field by placing the agents on a coordinate plane representing a social field according to the types and volumes of capital they hold.

Social fields are not single entities; they can be divided into sub-fields with more specific rules or dynamics of struggle, even at the institutional level. They

can also be covered by broader categorical fields such as economic and cultural. However, rather than being a branch of these broader fields in a linear relationship, fields are positioned in such a way that they have different points of intersection with each of the broader ones. The field of education, for example, is not restricted to being a sub-branch of the cultural field. It also intersects with the economic, political, and social fields.

Bourdieu prescribes specific requisites to address a social site as a field. The autonomy of the field must first be demonstrated (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). This can be done by looking at this field's distinctive relational order and rules, the specificity of the position and capital that agents gain within the field, and the kind of constraints to which they are subjected. In addition, the autonomy of a field can also be traced in the production of an independent and unique language, practices, and representations. Secondly, activities and their productions should be analyzed in a relational way to put forward the symbolic structure of the field. In this way, after examining the production, distribution, and consumption processes, actors' changing or solidifying positions can be relocated. This leads to the third requisite, the existence of power relations, i.e., the field of power (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015).

Field theory has led to critical discussions, including the status of the theory itself. The nomological approach focuses on the functioning of specific autonomous activity domains and relational laws and principles between them, while the methodological approach accepts the field as a tool of relational analysis for understanding social relations (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). Other criticisms of the theory include the difficulty in drawing the boundaries of the fields, the excessive number of fields in the horizontal and vertical planes, and the theory's focus on reproduction rather than change (Thomson, 2014). Nevertheless, when the field is considered methodologically, it provides a fruitful perspective in analytically understanding and describing the social space woven with complex relationships; hence, it has been utilized as a tool in this dissertation.

Although the field will be used as the primary tool here, since Bourdieu's tools work in unity, the other two main tools will also be discussed here. These tools, i.e., habitus and capital, will first be defined, and then their relationship

with the field will be revealed. Then it will be stated where they are positioned within the framework of the subject of this dissertation.

2.1.2 *The Relationship of Habitus with the Field*

Habitus is among the most widely cited and yet the most contested term of Bourdieu (Maton, 2014). He uses the term to transcend the dualities within social theory, such as the dichotomies of agency-structure, objective-subjective, and micro-macro (Reay, 2004b). Bourdieu rethought this old Aristotelian concept (1990, p. 11) to refer to the socially structured internalized dispositions of agents, as he defines it as "the system of structured, structuring dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 52). This dual characteristic of habitus as both structured and structuring shows its mediating position between structure and agency. In line with the former, it is structured because it is shaped by the cumulative experiences of the past, mediated through familial upbringing, social background, and the possession of various forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social). Concerning the latter, it is structuring because it provides room for agents to actively shape and modify social structures through the practices, thus creating the potential for transformation in addition to continuity.

The structured and structuring feature of habitus reveals its mutual relationship with the field. It is precisely this relationship that determines people's actions, not, as other philosophies (such as Kant's) claim, universal truths, a common conscience acquired a priori, according to Bourdieu. In other words, habitus, which is acquired in a relational way, is

> a socialized body, a structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world - a field - and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world. (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81)

According to Bourdieu (1990), objective conditions, i.e., the collection of fields, offer individuals room for action within the framework of "possibilities and impossibilities, freedoms and necessities, opportunities and prohibitions," hence agents have a structuring effect on the fields coming from their "infinite yet strictly limited generative capacity" (pp. 54-55).

An important point to mention from the Bourdieusian perspective is that these actions are not like the moves of a gambler trying to win in a card game based on the cards they receive; they are actions guided by internalized tendencies. The habitus is like "a second nature" to people who unconsciously behave according to it (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). Bourdieu quotes Pascal when explaining the relationship between field and habitus, "*Le monde me comprend mais je le comprends,*" and translates it as the world comprehends me (in the sense of encompass), but I comprehend it (in the sense of understand). For him, however, this is not a case of opposition (to be called *but*) but precisely a case of causation (to be called *because*). When the agent is in the field attuned to her habitus, she is like a "fish in water" because her habitus is already that field's product. For this reason, she acts in the familiar field in accordance with its second nature, without consciousness or calculation, as if she is "at home" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 127–128).

However, this does not mean that neither habitus nor field is permanent, unchangeable, or fixed. If so, the mutually generative cycle between field and habitus would not exist, and this approach would not differ from strict structuralism. The transformative power of the habitus, albeit limited, stems from the fact that the objective structure is not a fixed and monolithic entity. Habitus has the potential to transform the field depending on the resources and capital it possesses in moments of encounter with incompatible fields. Thus, the confrontations of habitus with unfamiliar fields, which create disjuncture, are the engines of social change and transformation (Reay, 2004). In addition, the way in which the habitus is constructed is also significant at this point because, just as the experiences and encounters, which can occur on the vertical temporal plane, constantly reproduce the habitus, the objective structure's interwoven being with different fields on the horizontal plane diversifies the habitus in various combinations. For instance, gender and race are among the categories (fields) that determine habitus, as Reay (2004) refers to McClelland. This allows the habitus to transform depending on the dynamic structure of each field. In these ways, field theory and habitus offer a way to understand and explain social change and reproduction.

To illustrate this theoretical approach through the subject of this dissertation, every family (or even parent) who sends their child to a preschool has a

habitus. These habitus are formed in objective structures woven by many fields. Each of the fields to which the habitus belongs, such as class, cultural, political, and religious, has an impact on it. For example, families belonging to the upper middle class choose private schools with specific standards, upper-middle-class families with religious sensitivities look for schools that also provide religious education, and families with higher levels of education pay attention to the method of education when choosing a school, which are indicators that they act in accordance with their habitus. In a social life of infinite possibilities, there are no stereotyped habitus but habitus diversified across different fields. For example, when a religious middle-class family chooses a school, they are not looking for an old-fashioned Qur'an school. Still, they look for a school that can provide a pedagogically appropriate education for their child, with an awareness of their level of education.

In some cases, they postpone religious education according to the educational philosophy they are convinced of. In other words, different fields may emerge in shaping their habitus on this issue. On the other hand, the conditions offered by the ECEC policy field also impact the direction in which the habitus of families will be activated. For example, families constrained by economic limitations may be forced to choose public schools that do not align with their cultural expectations, or families who have to send their kids to low-quality private kindergartens due to the lack of sufficient public kindergarten policies that accommodate the needs of full-time working parents. In addition to their habitus, it would be a more convenient perspective to analyze the practices of families in terms of the types of capital they possess, which will be discussed in the next section.

2.1.3 *The Forms of Capital in the Field*

Capital is another instrumental concept that Bourdieu developed and elaborated into social theory. Although it is referred to as the third tool here, it is actually like the bedrock of the theory established together with habitus and field, since it is the source of action. Bourdieu defines capital as "accumulated labor … [that] enables [agents] to appropriate social energy" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). On the one hand, it is a force that determines the dispositions and actions of agents, and on the other hand, it is the underlying principle of social

order. It is one of the elements of the equation Bourdieu uses to explain action: (Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). For this reason, a social field can only be described and analyzed through the capital owned by the agents within it

> in order to construct the field, one must identify the forms of specific capital that operate within it, and to construct the forms of specific capital one must know the specific logic of the field. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 108)

In addition to economic capital, which is presented in economic theory but is insufficient to explain the social order on its own, Bourdieu introduced other types of capital, such as cultural and social capital, to the literature. These newly developed forms are types of symbolic capital. Unlike economic capital, a visible means of making a profit, symbolic capital suppresses its instrumentality by claiming that it carries an intrinsic value. In the final analysis, however, it is a means of gaining privilege in society through different ways (Moore, 2014).

Bourdieu defines "three fundamental guises" of capital:

> as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ("connections"), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242)

Among these three, cultural capital is the one closely connected to the field of education, which is the subject of this dissertation. Bourdieu details cultural capital, mentioning its three states. Its *embodied state* implies the accumulation of cultural capital through the individual's cultivation and embodiment process. It is personalized, not instantly transferable like economic capital, and requires a personal investment costing time to acquire. It is implicitly acquired in the family and environment where people grow up, thereby being "the best

hidden form of hereditary transmission of cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245). The *objectified state* of cultural capital is observed through objects that carry symbolic value, even if they have economic value. These objects, however, can become active and effective capital only if they are used by agents in the relevant field. Finally, the *institutionalized state* of cultural capital refers to academic qualifications granted and guaranteed by specific institutions such as schools.

To exemplify these types of capital in the field of early childhood education and care, 1. The characteristics of parents and teachers from a more educated social environment, which are manifested in ways such as their approach to preschool education and the language they use, and which give them distinctiveness, are the embodied state of their cultural capital; 2. The children's books, read in the preschool period, that are approved by parents and teachers who are capable of recognizing their pedagogical appropriateness, or the wooden materials used in educational methods such as Montessori that have no special meaning for the uninitiated, or the sand and mud pools that have no value in their natural environment but acquire a new meaning in the school garden are cultural capital in its objectified state; 3. The universities and departments from which kindergarten teachers graduated and their certificates, which can be a point of reference when being evaluated by employers and parents, are indicators of the institutionalized state of cultural capital.

Social capital, another type of symbolic capital, is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" that is provided to the members of those networks (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247). An individual's social network significantly impacts their access to information, goods, and services. In a country like Türkiye, social connections are particularly influential, granting individuals access to resources and opportunities across various fields. This influence is also evident in early childhood education; for example, parents can benefit from their networks to find a reputable school or teacher, or teachers can use their connections to gain employment in a desirable institution.

Types of capital can be diversified as sources for power consolidation within each field, such as political capital in the political/bureaucratic/policy

field or religious capital in the religious field. To explain the relations, power balances, and the reproduction or loss of privileges within a social field, it is necessary to trace individuals' capital and the practices of activating it, which are not independent of their habitus. Therefore, in Bourdieusian social analysis, these three tools are necessarily interconnected, i.e., field, habitus, and capital.

2.1.4 *Complementary Theoretical Tools*

While this study is primarily grounded in Bourdieu's relational sociology, particularly the concepts of field, habitus, and capital, it also draws on theoretical tools from Basil Bernstein and Michael Apple to deepen the analysis of how power operates within early childhood education and care (ECEC). The need for a complementary analytical tool aligns with Bernstein's critique of Bourdieu's approach to cultural reproduction. As Bernstein (1996) observes, "Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction in education […] was more concerned with 'relations to' than 'relations within'" (p. 180). In this sense, Bourdieu's framework privileges the analysis of positions and power dynamics between fields, but offers less insight into the internal structuring of pedagogic discourse itself. Therefore, incorporating Bernstein's concepts provides a valuable addition, offering a deeper understanding of the pedagogical, symbolic, and institutional mechanisms through which values, knowledge, and identities are organized, transmitted, and reproduced within educational settings, with a particular focus on religious education within the scope of this dissertation.

Bernstein's concepts of *classification* and *framing* provide a lens to examine how knowledge is organized (classification) and how pedagogical relationships are regulated (framing). Bernstein first defines classification concerning the distribution of power, authority, and control that emerges between categories. The concept of classification lies at the core of his curriculum theory. It refers to the extent to which boundaries are established and maintained between the contents of the school curriculum. The strength of these boundaries, between fields, contents, and subjects, is shaped partly by sequencing rules grounded in principles of psychology, particularly developmental psychology, and partly by struggles among a particular kind of academic actor who symbolically constructs sub-realities within broader natural and social realities,

what Bourdieu (1988) calls Homo Academicus. Bernstein describes curricula in which subjects, contents, and fields are clearly separated and insulated from one another as having strong classification. In contrast, curricula in which these elements are interconnected, integrated, and marked by flexible and permeable boundaries are said to reflect weak or flexible classification (Köse, 2001, p. 111). According to him

> In the case of strong classification, each category has its unique identity, voice, and specialized rules of internal relations. In the case of weak classification, we have less specialized discourses, less specialized identities, less specialized voices. But classifications, strong or weak, always carry power relations. (Bernstein, 1996, p. 21)

Curricula at all levels of education, including early childhood education, can be analyzed through the lens of classification, which allows for an evaluation of whether the content is structured as closed or permeable. This permeability can be assessed both in terms of subject matter (e.g., how rigidly disciplines are separated or integrated) and in relation to the values and norms that educational institutions seek to transmit. A critical question is, when institutions define the values they aim to instill, do they operate within a self-contained habitus, reinforcing their own internal worldview, or do they remain open to engagement with broader social and cultural perspectives? Similarly, to what extent do parental preferences align with or challenge these institutional orientations? In other words, do families seek value systems that reinforce their existing dispositions, or are they open to educational environments that offer alternative or hybrid frameworks? Since one of the key concerns of this study is the transmission of religious values through early childhood education, I will examine how religious education is classified in relation to other curricular domains, such as the MoNE curriculum, drawing on Bernstein's concept of classification.

While classification concerns *what* meanings are selected, framing, Bernstein's second concept, focuses on *how* those meanings are structured and communicated in a classroom setting. It is based on the degree of control teachers and students have over the selection, sequence, pacing, criteria, and the social base of the content, knowledge, and skills to be covered in the

teaching and learning process. *Selection* refers to deciding which information, themes, or values will be included or excluded from the curriculum. *Sequence* refers to the order in which content is presented and determines how learning will build on previous material. *Pace* refers to the speed at which learners are expected to comprehend and progress through the content, affecting time allocation and depth. *Criteria* refer to the standards used to assess students' understanding and performance. *Social base* refers to the roles and relationships between teachers and students, as well as the broader cultural or institutional structures that support knowledge transfer. When framing is strong, the transmitter (typically the teacher or institution) maintains control over these key elements of the pedagogical process.

In contrast, when framing is weak, greater control shifts to the acquirer (the student), who may influence one or more of these elements, even if not all aspects at once (Bernstein, 1996). Furthermore, Bernstein, who critiques cultural reproduction theories for their limited engagement with the dynamics of transformation, argues that "*change can come at the level of framing*" (Bernstein, 1996, p. 30), underscoring the importance of analyzing pedagogical processes as sites of potential change. I will apply the concept of framing while examining how rising levels of cultural capital influence pedagogical orientations and practices within the processes of early childhood education service provision.

§ 2.2 Research on Education through Bourdieu's Lens

Education research has increasingly employed Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework to understand how cultural and social inequalities are reproduced through educational systems. His core concepts—habitus, capital, and field—have been highly influential and instrumental in analyzing the complex social dynamics within the context of education. However, in a special issue dedicated to Bourdieu, the widespread but superficial use of these concepts was seriously criticized, highlighting the need to focus not on *using* the theory but on *doing* it and his emphasis on combining the theoretical and empirical (Gale & Lingard, 2015). This literature review briefly addresses prominent scholars and studies that approach education, and subsequently specifically early

childhood education, from this perspective, both in general and in the context of Türkiye.

The major figures in the sociology of education have mainly utilized Bourdieu's relational perspective and tools at one point. Drawing fundamentally on Bourdieu's theory, in her book "Unequal Childhoods," Annette Lareau (2011) provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of social class on parenting practices and child-rearing strategies. She introduces and elaborates on concepts such as *concerted cultivation*, which describes the intensive involvement of middle-class parents in structuring their children's educational and extracurricular activities to foster skills that align with institutional expectations. This approach contrasts with the *accomplishment of natural growth*, more typical among working-class families, where children are given more freedom to manage their own activities. These concepts have become pivotal in educational sociology, providing insight into how different parenting styles contribute to the perpetuation of social inequalities. The idea of concerted cultivation, in particular, has been extensively referenced and utilized in subsequent studies, such as this one, to understand how middle-class families use their resources to maintain their social position through education.

Another significant figure in this field, Diane Reay, has contributed to the understanding of education through a Bourdieusian lens, focusing on how social class, gender, and race intersect to shape educational experiences and outcomes. In particular, Reay (1998, 2004) examines how working-class families navigate the educational system and how their limited cultural capital often results in unequal educational opportunities for their children. She and her colleagues also highlight how middle-class parents actively use their resources to secure educational advantages, perpetuating social stratification (Reay et al., 2011). Reay's work has been instrumental in demonstrating the emotional cost of social mobility for working-class students and in advocating for a more equitable education system. More recently, she has provided a psychosocial interpretation of the concept of habitus, connecting the individual's inner world with the structural social world (Reay, 2015).

Stephen Ball (2003) has conducted extensive research on the intersection of social class and education, particularly within the framework of market-driven policies that influence school choice and perpetuate social inequalities.

Ball's studies illustrate how middle-class parents use their economic, social, and cultural capital to navigate the competitive landscape of school admissions, ensuring better educational opportunities for their children. As argued in this study, his work serves as a good example of how both the supply and demand sides jointly ensure the reproduction of social inequalities. In addition, specifically in the field of early childhood education, Vincent & Ball (2006) conducted comparative research looking at the child care preferences of parents in two spatially and occupationally separated districts of London. They argue that deciding about child care is not only an economic and practical act of consumption but also a social, cultural, and emotional process. They show that the field of child care is both an enactment of and a reproduction of classed structures through the actions of middle-class families.

With a particular focus on the application of field theory in educational contexts, Bourdieu, whose theoretical and empirical work has always been interconnected, has conducted research on the French school system and universities (Bourdieu, 1988, 1996; Bourdieu, Pierre; Passeron, 1977). Following in his line of work, subsequent studies have applied this sociological analysis mainly to the second and third levels of education (Bathmaker, 2015). However, the following literature does not accept Bourdieu's concept of *field* without question. Rather, the concept has been further developed by a number of scholars in certain respects. As Wacquant says, "An invitation to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. xiv). These contributions include discussions on the autonomy of specific fields (Maton, 2005), the relationship between agents and curriculum in educational fields (Ferrare & Apple, 2015), and the effects of global flows on local and national settings (Appadurai, 1996).

Looking at related Turkish literature, Bourdieu's concepts have been widely used in research on different levels of education in Türkiye. However, these studies seem to emphasize mostly secondary and tertiary level education, as in other countries.

A well-known work exploring the relationship between education and social class in the context of Türkiye was conducted by Rutz & Balkan (2009). Their ethnographic research was on the private school choice process of new

middle-class parents in Istanbul while their children were preparing for secondary school exams in 1993. They use the concept of cultural capital and its forms, referring to Bourdieu as the theoretical basis of their study. They argue that "neither jobs nor lifestyles are sufficient to reproduce a class," but families are "the key agents in class reproduction" (Rutz & Balkan, 2009, p. 34), and the most important field for middle-class families to reproduce their own social class is education. However, they mention one's educational life, which is the source of cultural capital accumulation, by restricting it from primary school to university. This statement needs an important addition because the journey (at least the institutional one) begins with preschool education, and this is where this dissertation intends to contribute to the literature.

A recent example of this is Akçatepe et al. (2024)'s study on students at the high school level, which examines the essence of student practices. This study, which takes a phenomenological approach as a strategy of inquiry, differs from this ethnographic dissertation. However, it is significant in that it addresses the impact of family habitus and political rhetoric on school choice and shows how existing inequalities are reproduced when habitus and field overlap.

The fact of inequality fostered by the intergenerational transmission of economic and cultural capital has also been studied using quantitative methods. Building on Bourdieu's theory, Arun (2012) analyzed Türkiye according to occupational groups and observed that the upper segments, which hold more economic and cultural capital, preserve their privileges in the younger generations. In addition, a comparison between age groups reveals that in every occupational group, the proportion of capital in the younger generations is higher than in the older generations, which leads to symbolic conflict between generations (Arun, 2012). Although the study is not directly in the field of education, it is worth mentioning here because of the close relationship between the profession and the education received.

Another study used a mixed-method approach with both quantitative and qualitative data and focused on the relationship between children's achievement in the exams for transition from primary to secondary school and the cultural capital held by their families (Atmaca & Aydın, 2020). It was concluded that parents with high levels of cultural and economic capital

consciously generate various strategies to improve their children's academic achievement and their environment, thus helping them achieve higher status in society. A finding that may be more directly related to this study is the positive correlation between receiving a preschool education and being more successful in secondary school exams. It appears that children from families with more capital had the opportunity to receive an effective education from kindergarten onwards, which had a positive impact on their later academic success. The authors interpret this conscious investment of families in a Bourdieusian sense as being aware of the game and understanding how to play it (Atmaca & Aydın, 2020, p. 794)

Several dissertations written in the field of education in Türkiye that utilize Bourdieu's approach and concepts from a class-based perspective are also worth mentioning. In her research, based on three-year fieldwork (2016-2018), Özdemir (2018) also studied the strategies of middle-class parents of secondary school students attending the same school and living in the same housing complex in Istanbul. She presents the case of middle-class families attempting to create private-school-like conditions in a selected public school due to insufficient economic capital for the desired education. This is significant in showing the concerns of new middle-class parents about parenthood, education, and maintaining social class-based privileges.

Another study was conducted by Çimen Aratemür (2015), who argued that the relationship between education and middle-class reproduction has been largely overlooked. She investigated the choices, aspirations, and dispositions of middle-class parents within the context of neoliberalism in both a public and a private high school in Istanbul. Referring to Ball (2003), she differentiated between class theories and class practices, focusing on the latter.

In her recent study, Alothman (2022) investigates how families are involved in the transition process from middle school to high school. She argues that, in the preferences and strategies of families, not only their class-based habitus but also the state's educational policies have a significant impact. She traces the concept of uncertainty as the main theme that emerges during this process.

At this point, it should be emphasized that preschool education, which has now become the first level of education, is not a saturated research domain

for employing the Bourdieusian perspective in both general and Turkish literature. In the field of early childhood education and care, several studies have utilized Bourdieu's field theory at the institutional level. For example, the small-scale research of Vuorisalo & Alanen (2015) focuses on a specific preschool setting, tracing the application of capital by children in daily practices, resulting in inequalities and social injustice. With Bourdieusian acceptance of social space as a grid of different types and scales of fields, they mention the possibility and necessity of connecting their micro-field to broader levels of analysis, such as the Finnish educational system in their context.

One of the rare studies that examines the ECEC system from a Bourdieusian perspective at the national level rather than the micro level is Agbenyega's (2018) research. He observed that in the Ghanaian ECEC field, despite government policies offering free preschool education from the age of four, quality education was not achieved due to the habitus of teachers. His argument is that unless the habitus of teachers shifts from traditional punishment-based education to effective child-centered pedagogy, quality education that will positively affect the habitus of children will not be achieved. In this way, he used Bourdieu's tools on a relatively large scale and emphasized the competence of this method to explain the relationship between systemic structures and pedagogical practices in the analysis of an ECEC system (Agbenyega, 2018, p. 683). The habitus formed and reproduced in a specific social space offers a particular early education practice, in this case, an approach that renders the child a passive "receptacle" and is guided by punishment. And this is reproduced by shaping the habitus of the next generation. EC teachers learning and practicing pedagogical practices, thereby gaining cultural capital, according to the author, will produce a quality education, which in turn will enable children to gain symbolic capital by being seen as individuals, and in the long run, economic and cultural capital as well. Although Agbenyega's research differs from this research because it focuses more on teachers' and students' habitus rather than parents', it can still be seen as supportive in terms of looking at the same field at a similar scale and with the same tools.

To give another example, Kaščák & Pupala (2017) examine power relations in the preschool education sector in Slovakia using Bourdieu's field

theory. The authors analyze the power dynamics that emerged during a fundamental change in the national preschool curriculum, as well as the behaviors and strategies of powerful actors in subfields such as political, civil-professional, and academic. The study shows that power struggles ultimately led to a more democratic structure in early childhood education management. The article addresses the evolution from the communist era to the post-communist era and the impact of changes in the global education field. Ultimately, it emphasizes how fixed hierarchies were disrupted and participation strategies developed.

An important study that explores the urban preschool field through Bourdieu's concepts and also supports the perspective of this dissertation is the research conducted by Lareau et al. (2016). Their qualitative study examines the admission process of middle-class parents to kindergartens in a large urban district. Building on Bourdieu's concept of *field*, the study investigates how parents draw on cultural, social, and economic capital to gain a place in high-status schools while grappling with complex and inconsistent rules in the field. The study concludes that possessing any type of capital is insufficient without understanding the "rules of the game" and stresses that middle-class preferences and practices can only be comprehended within the context of the field. This perspective exemplifies how the concept of *field* enables a relational sociological understanding by mutually looking at both the structural environment and the agents who activate rather than only possess capital.

To conclude, benefiting from this theoretical framework of relational sociology and relevant works, this study aims to contribute to the literature by examining the complex relationships in the ECEC field, including both the supply side, policies, schools, and teachers, and the demand side, families, and their classed practices, in the Turkish context.

§ 2.3 A Relational Site: Early Childhood Education and Care

The realm of early childhood and care is a very challenging field of study as it encompasses the fields of childhood, care, and education. It can be addressed from many different perspectives, such as the sociology of childhood, developmental psychology, child care, or academic education, and can be analyzed

in a wide variety of ways by shifting the focus. As in any social field, both individuals and structures play a role in this sector. These actors, institutions, and structures that interact with each other can be listed as follows, without claiming to be exhaustive: children aged 0-6, whether or not they are benefiting from an institutional service; their parents/families; the social categorizations to which they belong, such as different social classes, ethnic groups, religious affiliations, educational backgrounds, ideological perspectives; public and private schools operating in the sector; the administrators, educators, and caregivers working in these schools, the educational methods and curricula followed in these schools, the relevant ministries and other institutions that regulate and monitor the establishment and operation of schools, the high education institutions that train personnel to work in schools, the pedagogues who work on how this education and care should be implemented, the social policies that are carried out or discussed in this field and the politicians and political environments who produce them; the economic sphere that includes the markets for the goods, services, and technologies used in schools. Consequently, the ECEC sector can be seen as a massive social site where elements of all these social, political, economic, cultural, and ideological fields meet at different points, where some orders are reproduced, and others are resisted through everyday practices. While it is definitely beyond the scope of this research to explore every dimension of this massive cluster, it is still significant to analyze the aspects that emerge from the qualitative data collected. In this manner, I will employ the perspectives and tools of sociologists, as referenced in the previous section, who examine education as a social field through a relational analysis approach.

Since the site of ECEC, besides the many agents mentioned above, has many layers, it would be convenient to study it through Bourdieu's field theory. To apply Bourdieu's above-mentioned requisites defining the social field to the ECEC site, first, it must be shown that this site is an autonomous field. It will be challenging because ECEC can be seen as a subfield of both the education and care fields. However, its very position at the intersection may prove that it is an autonomous field. ECEC has commonalities with both education and care, but it also forms a different order with its own rules and participants. For example, parents of children aged 0-6 years have different feelings and

attitudes than parents of more mature children, or educational methods developed for early childhood work specifically in this field. Secondly, the relationships between all these actors should be mapped. As a brief introduction to this endeavor, which will be carried out in detail in the analysis chapters, the broader areas that intersect with the ECEC field need to be revealed. The political or state field, for example, participates in the game by providing/regulating services in this field or withdrawing itself from it. In the cultural field, parents, the service recipients of ECEC, are among the most critical players in terms of their cultural capital, needs, choices, and strategies. The economic field intersects with the first two, as it encompasses all economic activities related to ECEC, including budgeting at both the state and family levels. Its subfield, the market field, can be referred to as an influential participant in the context of the fieldwork of this study. Thirdly, at the end of the relational analysis, it should be displayed how the individuals, institutions, or structures participating in the game take positions in this process, what kind of power relations and struggles they engage in, which can be seen within the scope of the field of power, and on which issues (which referred as themes of the study below) they cause reproduction and on which issues they cause change.

In the interim, since children are the main subjects in this field, studies conducted with their participation will shed more light from the inside. However, the fact that such studies require pedagogical formation is a limitation for the researcher. As stated in the methodology section, in this study, children were not directly contacted, and the social relations established in this world where they are at the center were tried to be understood from the perspectives of their parents, teachers, and school administrators.

As a result of the attempt to elucidate the functioning of this site of ECEC by gathering data on the conditions, needs, preferences, and strategies of the mentioned actors, two main themes emerged that appear to operate mechanisms of reproduction. The first is social class, and the second is value transmission. The following sections will provide a conceptual discussion of these two themes, and the following chapters will present the data analysis within these theoretical frameworks.

§ 2.4 Social-Class Projections

According to studies, the most important variables affecting participation in preschool education in Türkiye are household wealth, maternal education level, and maternal employment status (AÇEV & ERG, 2017). This may lead to the conclusion that the social class possessing a certain level of economic and cultural capital, i.e., the middle class, is most likely to benefit from institutional ECEC services. When examining the practices of the parents' side, as an essential player in the ECEC site, the social class to which they belong is added as a new field to the analysis. However, the concept of the middle class is very vague and challenging to hold on to. For this reason, it is first necessary to define how this concept will be handled. In this section, the concepts of social class and its subfield, the middle class, will be briefly summarized, and the way in which they will be used in this dissertation will be explained.

Class analysis in the twenty-first century is a matter of debate. Traditional Marxist analysis of class has been annotated with the necessity of a broader and deeper perspective, including social and cultural aspects. Furthermore, according to postmodern theorists, class, as a unit of explanation for inequalities, has died since any relationship between economic position and cultural identity, generating the latter from the former, has been eliminated by individualization (Bottero, 2004). Beyond the orthodox analysis based on economic capital and postmodern statements arguing "the death of class," a third alternative is advocated by Devine and Savage (1999), which is referred to as "cultural class analysis." According to this new class theory, social and cultural practices can reproduce hierarchical class structures even without class consciousness. Individualization does not bring about the complete death of class; instead, it transforms the way class functions. Accordingly, people, even if they do not have an explicit collective class identity, can still shape their identities through relational comparisons with members of different social classes, thereby reformulating class cultures around individualized aspects (Savage, 2000, p. xiii). Bottero (2004) mentions this new meaning of class in which class identity is gained through "a sense of relational social distance within a hierarchy" rather than "explicit attachment to a collectivity" (Bottero, 2004, p. 990), following Bourdieu's (1984) relational approach to class. According to

Bourdieu, contemporary class is not a "class for itself" whose members are consciously engaged and act collectively, as Marx claimed within his own historical conjuncture. Instead, class today exists more as a theoretical or on-paper "class in itself" produced unconsciously by its members (Crossley, 2014). The clustering habitus of individuals in the social sphere produces convergent practices within the cluster and similar processes of differentiating themselves from outsiders. This leads to a process of visible group formation, in other words, an unconscious class production, without the intention of performing a class. Therefore, the crucial point is not the self-conscious assertion of class identity, but rather the classed character of social and cultural practices, which will be traced in this research.

However, the cultural class theory has been criticized in certain ways, such as that this perspective tries to reveal basically the interclass tension, i.e., between middle-class and working-class identities (Bottero, 2004; Karademir Hazir, 2014, p. 681). Analyzing social class through a rigid binary distinction between middle-class and working-class defined by only income and occupation causes some points to be overlooked (Vincent, 2017). First point, factors such as lifestyle and social networks, which were added to the literature under Bourdieu's influence, have shown that these classes are not homogeneous but transitional and include intermediate positions. Secondly, the impact of other variables such as race, ethnicity, and gender on social analysis, and in this context on the analysis of motherhood and schooling, is not taken into account (Vincent, 2017). The ideology-based identity factor, which emerged as a theme in this study rather than others, can be added to these variables. Therefore, ignoring the vertical (socioeconomic) and horizontal (cultural/ideological) diversities within a class prevents the display of that class's formation.

Consequently, the class has been brought back into sociological analysis in a new form, eliminating the shallowness of economic determinism and the nihilist effect of extreme individualism. A more relational approach to social class is now on the stage concerning the interaction between economic, social, and cultural practices and positions, and the ways in which inequalities and hierarchies are reproduced in everyday life.

2.4.1 *Dare to Say "Middle Class"*

In a class-based analysis of society, the middle class is commonly conceptualized as positioned between the binary oppositions of haves and have-nots in society. However, since it is difficult to define the boundaries of this concept, it is like a "puzzle" in Wacquant's (1991) words, which is challenging to apply. In classical social theory, Savage et al. (1992) mention three approaches to the concept. The first approach sees the middle class only in relation to subordinated or dominated classes, ascribing its interests and concerns to either of these classes. The representative of the first group is the Marxist analysis, bracketing the middle class either with the proletariat, with no ownership, or with the bourgeoisie, with a certain power. For some Marxists, such as Braverman (1974), the concept of the middle class is an illusion because, as he argues, capital tends to deskill and proletarianize even white-collar workers, i.e., the middle class, by breaking down and simplifying the labor process for the sake of productivity. On the contrary, some other Marxists, such as Wright (1978) and Carchedi (1977), foreground the function the middle class performs in the interest of the capitalist class, conceptualizing it from the perspective of exploitation relations (Wacquant, 1991).

The second perspective, led by Weber and some Weberian writers, is a descriptive one, trying to show the distinctiveness of the middle class without explaining the reason why such middle-class positions emerged (Savage et al., 1992). The third group accepts the middle classes "as social classes in their own right," meaning that they have certain assets, lifestyles, habits, and incomes peculiar to themselves, and they have an impact on social change by engaging in social action and exploitative relationships (Savage et al., 1992, p. 5). The acceptance of the middle class as a new social class is parallel with the debates on the service class or professional-managerial class. However, while defining the boundaries of the middle class and its fractions, it is deficient in focusing only on the occupation of individuals. Some reasons for this are the inability to distinguish occupations sharply as professional/managerial or public/private, to describe families by these dichotomies in the cases of both working parents in different sectors, and to confirm that people from certain occupations reveal specific lifestyles and values rather than the otherwise (Vincent & Ball, 2006, p. 52).

Therefore, Vincent and Ball (2006) mention the need for a more complex formulation than a simple categorization based on occupations while analyzing the social formation of the middle class. At this point, they criticize the approach of Savage et al. (1992), which explains the diversity of the middle class among cultural assets inspired by Bourdieu's cultural capital and lifestyles, referring to certain occupational groups. According to this approach, people obtain their social positions through storing and converting certain assets, i.e., property, organization, and cultural assets, to produce material rewards, and their lifestyles and consumption are formed according to their types of employment. This approach of Savage et al. (1992), based on having assets and the ability to convert them into wealth, brings about a gradual look at social classes by scaling people according to the number of assets they have.

Savage's (2015) later work, which analyzes the reconfiguration of class in the twenty-first century, argues that the top and bottom segments of society are clearly differentiated, while the middle, where he identifies five distinct class groups, including the *established middle class, technical middle class, new affluent workers, traditional working class,* and *emergent service workers*, is characterized by a complex and uneven distribution of various forms of capital. However, Bradley (2014) critiques Savage for maintaining a gradational model of class, relying on a linear hierarchy. She instead offers a relational approach to capture the fluid and evolving dynamics of contemporary class formation (Bradley, 2014). Wacquant (1991) explicates this relational perspective in his analysis of the middle class as "Class lies neither in structures nor in agency alone but in their relationship as it is historically produced, reproduced, and transformed" (p. 51). The middle class cannot be defined through a priori categorization. Rather, it results from its symbolic and political organization. Therefore, one should focus on "the historical and comparative analysis of concrete processes of class formation" instead of "abstract, formal typologizing and a priori pigeonholing" while analyzing the middle class (Wacquant, 1991, p. 51).

In addition to rejecting the objective classification between classes, the monolithic imagination of the middle class is also criticized. Assuming that a unified collective identity exists among all people middling in society is an indicator of a strict and orthodox class analysis (Bottero, 2004). In order to

reveal the intraclass fractions, Lamont uses the term *symbolic boundaries*, which can be linked to the *distinction* concept of Bourdieu, defined as "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). While those social actors draw symbolic boundaries around themselves by including those alike and excluding those who differ in a certain subject, they also reproduce social boundaries through which inequality in access to and distribution of resources is maintained in their class (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

The social reproduction of the middle class stems from the interaction between social structure and human agency (Kaufman, 2005). Although structural forces, such as the accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capitals, have an impact on the continuity of current systems, "without purposeful action, skillful negotiation, and the activation of structural advantages, the intergenerational transfer of a privileged middle-class status would be jeopardized," according to Kaufman (2005, p. 265). It is required to invest and activate social resources in order to get social benefits from them (Lareau, 2000, p. 177). Therefore, the middle class cannot be defined in a sentence, but its relational formation between structure and agency can be revealed by analyzing its vertical and horizontal fractions through the preferences and practices of people.

2.4.2 *The Turkish Middle Class at a Glance*

The formation of the middle class in Türkiye through demographic transitions has been comparatively recent with respect to early industrialized countries. Beginning after 1950, certain social factors such as mechanization in agriculture, urbanization, migration, and qualified labor demand for the service sector transformed the structure of the middle class by rendering its profile of small property owners and agricultural producers into white-collar workers and professionals (Karademir Hazir, 2014). However, in the Turkish context, it is hard to confine class debates to socio-economic criteria. Since the state has been involved in the empowerment process of various groups, such as industrialists, farmers, and export traders, at different times, the ideological position of the governments has had an impact on the (re)production of social classes. Therefore, categorizing the Turkish social classes based on only

occupation is deficient since political and ideological positions are embedded in class divisions, making the definitions and analysis harder. Furthermore, there is no perfect polarization in terms of economic positions, political attitudes, and cultural status. Rather, the society, mainly the middle class, consists of intersections of social, economic, cultural, and ideological clusters. An appropriate analysis should reveal intersection sets of these clusters to show where people draw their boundaries, in which points they have shared concerns, which consumption tendencies, in the field of education, for the context of this dissertation, make them similar, and how they construct a social class pattern even if without class consciousness. This section provides examples of how the Turkish middle class is discussed in the literature.

Karademir Hazır (2014), drawing on Lamont's concept of symbolic boundaries, identifies four middle-class identity repertoires based on how individuals distinguish themselves from others. *Cultural excluders*, with high capital and upper-middle-class backgrounds, emphasize Western "high culture" and use cultural boundaries to exclude groups like the "new rich." *Intellectuals*, typically in academia or the public sector, prioritize moral values and authenticity, drawing inclusive "anti-boundaries" that reject artificial foreign lifestyles. *Aspirants*, with moderate capital, aspire to elite tastes but face financial constraints, leading to strategic consumption and critical views of traditional lifestyles. *First generations*, despite similar capital to Aspirants, show less status anxiety, value modesty and functionality, and maintain strong ties to their original social networks, aligning with the inclusive stance of Intellectuals.

The research of Çetin and Özdemir (2021) presents a particular society profile in which social classes are divided with respect to not only the possession of capital but also certain ideologies. In their projection, the middle class, whose origins precede the JDP government, consists of people having secular/Kemalist ideologies, whereas those who have a religious worldview compose the lower-income classes, who are also the electors of the present government.

However, the multidimensional analysis of Combarnous et al. (2019), which consists of an income-based economic analysis derived from SILC (Survey on Income and Life Conditions) data collected by TÜİK (the Turkish Statistical Institute) and also a sociological analysis based on qualitative

interviews informing about education and employment, reveals the heterogeneity of the Turkish middle class. They compile the markers of Turkish middle-class membership as house ownership or home buying process, security demand, car ownership, private school preference for their children, private health insurance (for the upper-middle-class segment), and vacation routine (Combarnous et al., 2019, p. 177). Nevertheless, this standard of living of the middle class is not easily affordable for most members. Combarnous et al. (2019) point out that the middle class is entitled as an "indebted class" that depends on credit. They classify the middle class according to employment into four groups: retired and inactive (39% of the middle class), farmers (13%), industry and service workers and small entrepreneurs (31%), and employers and executives (17%). According to the authors, the first and fourth groups consist of the Turkish "old middle classes" losing ground, whereas the second and third groups are the "new middle classes" gaining power since the 2000s (Combarnous et al., 2019, pp. 169-171). On the other hand, concerning the ideological aspects, the Turkish middle class contains both secular and conservative elements: the former is mentioned as the "old middle class" and the latter as the "new middle class" by Combarnous et al. (2019, p. 178).

From a different point of view, Rutz & Balkan (2009) define the new middle class, deviating from the core and lower middle class, as an "urban, professional, highly educated and globally linked fraction" (p. 19) that emerged in the era of economic globalization and through neoliberal policies of the state. In the same vein, Uner & Gungordu (2016), writing from a marketing perspective, "conceptualize the new middle class as households that have gained substantial disposable income and experienced significant lifestyle changes since the 1980s, when the market liberalization reforms in Turkey commenced" (p. 668). They embrace the Iceberg Model of Cavusgil & Kardes (2013), which describes the discretionary consumption of people as the visible part of the iceberg and their education, occupation, values, and political attitudes as its invisible part. They recommend looking at the invisible parts to understand the (new) middle class. They present seculars and conservatives as the subgroups of the new middle class differently from what Combarnous et al. (2019) do. Thus, "new middle class" does not refer to the same thing in the literature. I prefer the approach of Uner and Gungordu (2016), which shows the complex

structure of the new middle class, including both secular and conservative segments.

Most Turkish middle-class families from both of the ideological segments mentioned above put their children at the center of their lives and organize their expenses, savings, the use of leisure, or future plans according to them (Combarnous et al., 2019; Uner & Gungordu, 2016). Children's education, which has "the historically fortified mythical status" (Ergin et al., 2019, p. 6), is an essential issue for them, not only to obtain a comfortable life but also to differentiate themselves from disadvantaged classes, just as they try to do in their lifestyle. This distinctive sign of middle-class membership can be traced to the fact that they prefer private schools for their children (while more disadvantaged families have to send their children to public schools) (Combarnous et al., 2019), provide children with a foreign language education (Uner & Gungordu, 2016), and support their development with extra educational activities. Therefore, these "children-oriented" middle-class parents intend not only to provide the well-being of their children and a better future for them but also "believe that to ensure their current status in the future, their children should be educated very well" (Uner & Gungordu, 2016, p. 676). This pursuit of "children-oriented" strategies is shared among both secular and religious segments of society who display upper-middle-class practices. A recent study by Kolluoğlu and Dinçer (2023) demonstrates both convergence and divergence between these two groups: while secular and religious professional–managerial parents in Istanbul differ in the role they assign to religion in education, they converge in their emphasis on private schooling, extracurricular activities, and the accumulation of global cultural capital as markers of middle-class reproduction. Their findings connect directly to the second theme of this dissertation, religious habitus, by showing how educational aspirations and anxieties are simultaneously classed and value-laden. The shared emphasis on education among both secular and religious middle-class families becomes even more pronounced in the domain of preschool education. Since the ECEC services are not compulsory and not entirely publicly provided, the expansion of the private sector targeting a wide spectrum in terms of age and duration of care is also an indication that the issue cannot stay away from a class debate.

§ 2.5 Religious Value Transmission

The second theme that emerged in the fieldwork conducted in the field of preschool education was religious value transmission. One reason for this is that the parents interviewed, in addition to having a certain level of income and education, whose classed consequences are discussed as the first theme, were mostly people who performed Islamic rituals and were concerned about providing religious education to their children. The second reason can be that 4-6-year-old Qur'an courses operating in the field are included in the study as early childhood education institutions, targeting the same age group and funded by the state budgets. During the early childhood period, children can be taught social values from a developmental perspective, national values through the Ministry of National Education curriculum, and religious values as a result of parental demand and government pro-religious policies. Due to the structure of the field, which changes according to political dynamics, and the high percentage of interviewees coming from a religious background, this section, theoretically, and the sixth section, in terms of field data analysis, focus on discussing the ways in which religious values are transmitted in the ECEC field.

2.5.1 *Framing religion*

It is contested to conceptualize religion, whether as ideology, identity, cultural system, cultural capital, or value. Although these frameworks are not mutually exclusive, each offers a distinct analytical lens. Geertz (1973) frames religion as a cultural system, not merely a set of beliefs or rituals, but a symbolic framework through which individuals interpret their world. He argues that the anthropological study of religion demands a dual focus: first, on the internal meanings embedded in religious symbols and practices, and second, on their social functions, how these meanings relate to broader psychological and social-structural processes (Geertz, 1973, p. 125). While many scholars have emphasized religion's functional role in society, Geertz underscores the importance of carefully interpreting its symbolic dimensions rather than taking them for granted.

Within the political field, religion operates as both culture and ideology, offering powerful resources for collective action, according to Williams:

> [Religion is] a useful resource for social movements because it is a great source of […] both "culture" and "ideology." Religion shapes the identity, the sense of solidarity, and the moral outrage that are integral to social-movement cultures. Motivated believers are the core of any collective action. At the same time, religious doctrine and theology can offer coherent and elaborated cognitive rationales that diagnose social problems, prescribe possible solutions, and justify the movement's actions. Thus, religion as a political resource is both culture and ideology, with both theoretical and empirical significance for the study of politics and collective action. (R. H. Williams, 1996, p. 307)

Nevertheless, referring to religion as ideology remains a conceptually sensitive issue. Whether it is strategically employed by dominant classes or adopted by subordinate groups, the term carries strong theoretical baggage. As Apple (2019) mentions, "functionally, ideology has been evaluated historically as a form of false consciousness which distorts one's picture of social reality and serves the interests of the dominant classes in a society" (p. 19). Thus, treating religion as ideology requires analytical care to avoid reducing it to mere manipulation without analyzing its social and cultural sources.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, religious knowledge can be understood as a form of religious capital, which grants symbolic power to its holders within the religious field or in religion-related subfields of the broader social field. As Baker and Miles-Watson (2010) explain, Bourdieu

> sees religious capital functioning in a similar way to cultural capital, i.e., institutionalized specialists guard and maintain a 'deliberately organized corpus of secret… knowledge.' These specialists are socially recognized by laity who develop the habits and ways of thinking required by the religion in question (known as a *habitus*). Both religious and cultural capital can thus function as closed systems, where class distinctions continuously and objectively reproduce themselves *ad infinitum*, although in reality, the way in which the habitus is formed is more complex and dynamic. (Baker & Miles-Watson, 2010, p. 31)

This sense of religious capital, resembling cultural capital, is acquired through religious education, serving as a source of respect, legitimacy, and authority among those who do not possess it. Similar dynamics appear in other fields like art or higher education, where symbolic capital allows specific groups, such as autonomous artists or elite academics, to maintain distinction and reinforce their status within closed systems of legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1991a, p. 22). Religious capital, for Bourdieu, is shaped by the existing structure of relationships between *"religious demand (*i.e., the religious interests of various groups or classes of laity) and *religious supply* (i.e., religious services)" (Bourdieu, 1991a, p. 22). What these actors offer is determined by their position within the hierarchy of religious power, which itself reflects the amount of religious capital they possess.

However, Bourdieu's sociology of religion is criticized for being a sociology of French Catholicism, which is under the monopolization by a single institution (Dianteill, 2003). Similarly, McKinnon (2017) is challenging its tendency to conceptualize religion primarily as a hierarchical field that reproduces class distinctions in alignment with dominant power structures. While Bourdieu's framework emphasizes religion's role in symbolic domination and social reproduction, largely through elite-controlled institutions, McKinnon (2017) argues that such a view overlooks the diversity, reflexivity, and agency present in contemporary religious life. He highlights the limitations of a vertical model of cultural capital and proposes that religion should instead be viewed through a more pluralistic and decentralized lens, since a certain religious capital does not always translate to dominant or elite cultural status universally. In line with his perspective of religious beliefs and practices as "different aspects of lifestyle" (McKinnon, 2017, p. 4) in the context of this research, the focus shifts toward an identity-based perspective, which emphasizes how religious values are enacted by specific segments of society. Because religious identity, unlike economic capital, cannot always be ranked hierarchically, it is conceptualized here as a form of horizontal cultural capital, reflecting the diversity of lifestyles within a plural society. Along with that, under certain conditions, any form of capital, whether tied to religion, ethnicity, or race, may be mobilized to gain symbolic or material power. This dynamic will be explored further in relation to the political field in the sixth chapter.

§ 2.6 Conclusion

In examining the field of early childhood education and care, which is the focus of this study, the lens of relational sociology is applied rather than a functionalist perspective that would aim to show only the consequences and effects of this education sector. In this context, the relationalities between structures, institutions, and agents are taken as the center of the research, and the production processes of power relations and inequalities are examined. Bourdieu's field theory inspired the research in order to analyze this complex social site, which is multi-actor and intertwined with many categories. The fourth chapter focuses on the supply side, i.e., the centers providing education and care for children aged 0-6 together with the governing institutions with which they are affiliated, in order to make the complex structure of the Turkish early childhood education and care field more comprehensible and to put "the rules of the game" into perspective.

In the demand side of the ECEC social field, it has been observed that the habitus that determines the actions of agents emerged in two distinct themes. The first one is social class, which is analyzed not in terms of rigid and absolute boundaries but, as relational sociology predicts, in terms of daily life practices that are mutually and constantly reproduced. As seen in the field, the converging tendencies, concerns, and preferences of the social segment demanding ECEC services appeared as middle-class practices, and this concept also needed to be discussed. However, all the mentioned different attempts at categorizing the term "middle class" also indicate that it is daring to use it. This is because the term lacks a precise definition, and its upper and lower boundaries are unclear. Moreover, it represents a non-monolithic social class composed of socio-economic and cultural vertical clusters and (again) cultural and ideological horizontal clusters.[1] On the other hand, despite this diverse structure, it cannot be denied that there is a converging middle-class culture, in terms of education level, occupation, consumption habits, and investment expectations, which was observed in the informants of this research. Although it may be inconvenient to categorize multi-layered and multi-component

[1] While "cultural" in the vertical sense refers mainly to the level of education, in the horizontal sense, it relates to different lifestyles that can be associated with identity and ideological differences.

households as members of certain social classes, the middle class is still a concept that has to be referred to when scrutinizing the actions and practices of the individuals within households. At this point, it is pertinent to note that in this analysis of the field of ECEC, the concept of the middle class is not used to classify individuals and designate or label them as "middle class" or not. Instead, it is used to signify dispositions, choices, and practices often attributed to the middle class. In this dissertation, middle-class practice in the context of ECEC refers to the behavior of educated individuals (mostly university graduates), who, despite having varying income levels, share a common concern about the quality of schools their children will attend. These parents evaluate educational services carefully and according to the preferences and standards shaped by their cultural capital. Focusing on social class *practices* rather than class *identities* highlights the existence of a multifaceted social order where individuals may engage in practices that differ from those typically associated with their income or occupational categories. For instance, an individual from a working-class background, although less likely, as Bourdieu clarified, might gain cultural capital, transform their habitus, and engage in practices differing from their original social class. Similarly, individuals who increase their economic capital but lack cultural capital may exhibit practices disconnected from particular tastes or preferences. While the fifth chapter presents the data analysis on social class projections in the field of ECEC from this relational perspective and describes preferences and attitudes within the field of ECEC as "classed," it specifically refers to middle-class practices shaped by cultural capital. The term "middle-class," as applied to families and parents, is intended not as a label but as shorthand to highlight that they are engaging in middle-class practices described above.

The second theme revealed in the research can be named religious value transmission. Education has a significant role in transferring universal knowledge and ethical values to the new generation, as well as in instilling national and religious values. It has been observed in the field that this is actively pursued even in the period of early childhood. As in the social class, the attitudes of families regarding the transmission of values are not independent of the habitus in which they were raised. Depending on the characteristics of the fieldwork, religious values emerge as one of the most salient themes

mentioned, since most of the informants have a religious habitus. Therefore, the sixth chapter will analyze parents' preferences, practices, and strategies in cultivating religious values in the ECEC field, as well as in navigating other national and community values, within the boundaries shaped by the political and market fields.

3

Methodology

This study aims to map the structure of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) field in Istanbul and reveal how certain actors, specifically middle-income, highly educated, and predominantly religious mothers, navigate within it. As in the Bourdieusian perspective, "the boundaries of the field can only be determined by an empirical investigation" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100), this research approaches the ECEC field through direct engagement with its actors and institutions. Using a qualitative field study grounded in ethnographic methods, the research examines how socio-economic and religious habitus, together with different forms of capital, shape parental preferences, strategies, and engagement with ECEC institutions in relation to the spectrum of educational options emerging within the field. Given the study's concern with capturing both the structural and experiential dimensions of parental school choice, a qualitative ethnographic approach was the most appropriate methodology. Unlike quantitative designs, which can significantly measure the prevalence of certain attitudes or behaviors but often overlook the nuanced contexts in which they arise, ethnographic methods facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and practices within their social and cultural environments. As a fellow academic, Mayer (2020) once put it in a wordplay, "Numbers numb, stories store," while quantitative data can flatten complexity, qualitative narratives preserve and convey it.

Fieldwork is a living process that can change direction over time and develops iteratively. A researcher's initial starting point may shift considerably as the research unfolds. When I first identified the ECEC field as a significant area for investigation, my focus was on the insufficient public provision and the high level of privatization in Istanbul, where private day care centers of varying standards have begun to appear on almost every corner. For this reason, when I entered the field as part of my ethnography class research, which I had intended to shape into a preliminary study for my dissertation, my initial aim was to focus on the transfer of child care responsibilities to private institutions, the emotional responses this generated in mothers, and how these private institutions marketed themselves for this purpose. I was particularly interested in exploring the possible consequences of the commodification of child care, a sector inherently fragile and deeply imbued with emotional significance. However, the field showed me that child care choice was a reflection of these families' social class and cultural position, and that the resulting uneven service sector was being shaped through the combined inputs of both institutional structures and parental preferences. In addition, as a researcher, my own habitus had an impact on my pool of interviewees, accessed through expanding concentric social circles, in ways that reflected my own background: middle-income, highly educated, and predominantly religious mothers. At the outset, religiosity was not a factor I had considered as a variable in the ECEC field. However, due to the participant profile, the theme of religious instruction in early education became increasingly prominent, and I came to realize that it was, in fact, a significant and revealing dimension of the field within the current political conjuncture. In this way, fieldwork, which cannot be predicted in every respect, shapes the research, and the empirical knowledge obtained thus also shapes the theory.

This field study aligns with an interpretivist approach, as its primary data source is in-depth interviews designed to "explore people's individual and collective understandings, reasoning processes, social norms, and so on" (Mason, 2002, p. 56), rather than relying predominantly on observation within a bounded cultural setting as an old-school ethnography, although the analysis is nonetheless enriched by participant observation in ECEC contexts. The study simultaneously adopts a critical orientation, recognizing that both the

shared perspectives captured as data and their interpretations in analysis are inseparable from the social structures in which they are embedded. This stance connects "social behaviour and social structure" and enables an "analysis of the connections between issues of everyday activity in specific schools and the broader social, cultural and structural issues that relate to such interaction" (Angus, 1986, p. 74). This perspective resonates with Bourdieu's emphasis on relational thinking, which views social phenomena as the product of dynamic interactions between structure and agency. By situating empirical accounts within the relational spaces of field, habitus, and capital, I attempt to ensure that theory and method operate together: the theoretical lens guides the focus of data collection and analysis, while empirical insights from the field refine and nuance the theoretical framework.

This section first addresses the research design, the process of entering the field, and expectations versus the realities of fieldwork. It then provides a detailed explanation of data collection methods, sources, and informant profiles, followed by a description of the data analysis process with an emphasis on thematic analysis. The section concludes with a discussion of the study's methodological limitations.

§ 3.1 Research Design and Fieldwork

I define this research as a field study, using ethnographic methods because it is grounded in prolonged engagement with the field, combining multiple qualitative methods to capture both structural conditions and lived experiences within the preschool education and care sector. Ethnography, in its contemporary sense, is not limited to classical, bounded cultural settings but extends to complex social fields where institutions, practices, and meanings intersect. As Hammersley & Atkinson (2010) outline, ethnography typically involves studying people's practices and accounts in their everyday contexts, drawing on multiple sources of data, but relying heavily on participant observation and in-depth conversations. Data collection is usually flexible and unstructured, allowing categories to emerge through analysis rather than being imposed in advance. Ethnography tends to focus on a small number of cases in order to enable in-depth exploration, and the analysis emphasizes interpreting the

meanings and consequences of actions and practices within their wider social and institutional contexts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2010). My research reflects these characteristics: it relies on in-depth interviews, observations in the everyday environments of parents and providers, and documents gathered relevant to the field; it developed iteratively rather than through a fixed design; and it seeks to interpret how parental strategies and institutional practices in the ECEC field are shaped by broader social class and religious dynamics.

As I mentioned in the opening sentence of this dissertation, I first entered this field as a parent. I had actually experienced one year of this stage of education years ago as a student myself, being the child of working parents when enrolment rates were low back then. Over the years, however, the sector had changed and expanded considerably in both its supply structure and the expectations of demand.

Since the preschool education sector in Türkiye operates in a split form, addressing its institutional structure comprehensively is particularly challenging. When designing the research, I intended to cover only private schools because my initial focus was on the commercialization of child care, and even within this narrower focus, however, schools under the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS) differed from each other. The most obvious distinction concerned the age groups served: while preschools under MoNE served ages 3–6, others under MoFSS covered children from birth up to age six. In addition, this split in governing bodies doubled the bureaucratic procedures required to apply for research permission. When I later expanded the scope of the study to include public schools, municipal nurseries, and Qur'an courses under the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA), to provide an all-embracing account of the Turkish ECEC field, obtaining official permission proved challenging, so I mainly relied on my own connections to reach teachers and parents.

§ 3.2 Data Collection and Informant Profile

While mapping the institutional structure, I drew on written sources such as legal documents, reports from international organizations, and related news articles. In addition, both as a parent and as a researcher, I conducted

observations in ECEC settings as well as in face-to-face and online communication spaces where the topic was discussed. Many women in my close circle of friends and extended networks, acquaintances, and fellow alumni, married and had children soon after graduating from university. This led to the fact that informal gatherings often turned into spaces where child care and preschool search, access, and evaluation were shared and discussed. These conversations played an important role in shaping the themes I became interested in and the questions I later asked in my research. My observations in school settings were also informed by the schools I encountered within my own social circle, but were primarily based on the schools where I conducted interviews. The aspects I paid attention to include the organization of classrooms, lighting, the colors, furniture and materials used, the condition of gardens and play areas, teachers' comments about all these conditions, the spaces where they hosted me, their attitudes toward their students, and toward my two-year-old daughter when she accompanied me, students' adherence to routines, the noise level in classrooms, and displays such as bulletin boards hanging on the walls.

The primary empirical basis of the research consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews I conducted between 2022 and 2025 with parents, teachers, and administrators in the field. In addition, seven preliminary interviews I conducted in 2019 in the context of the ethnography class I took then, along with a focus group with five parents from the same preschool, provided further insights. This focus group was organized through an open call to parents at a private school to which I had personal connections. The five participating mothers, aged between 35 and 45, responded in turn to my questions about preschool choice and also commented on each other's answers. The most valuable contribution of the focus group was precisely this interaction: the ways participants compared their own childhood experiences with today's child care landscape, reinforced each other's concerns and priorities in school choice, and encouraged those who expressed hesitations. These exchanges highlighted the shared, rather than purely individual, aspects of parental decision-making and created a more relaxed atmosphere of trust. In contrast to a one-on-one interview with a researcher, the group setting enabled women

from a similar habitus to speak more openly and reflectively, which added depth to the study.

Individual interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes, were audio-recorded, and later transcribed. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and they read and signed a consent form that ensured their voluntary participation, confidentiality, and right to withdraw at any stage. Signed consent forms have been securely stored in a locked file accessible only to me as the researcher.

In determining the interviewees, I used both quota and snowball sampling methods. The field contains many different types of institutions offering education at varying standards and from differing perspectives; therefore, it was a logical and reliable decision to set quotas for each category. The categories were defined according to the following distinctions: public (under MoNE, municipalities, PRA)/private (under MoNE, MoFSS); secular/religious (based on provision of religious instruction), neighborhood socio-economic status (SES) scores, and school fees (low/medium/high/very high). To reach potential informants, I designed a participation form that gathered basic demographic details along with information about the school they or their children were affiliated with and the governing body of that institution. I first circulated the form within my wider social circles, and as the data collection progressed, I posted a research announcement on social media to address gaps in underrepresented categories, which in turn helped balance the sample.

In practice, even if interviewees fell into a particular category based on the institution their child was currently attending (for parents) or where they work (for teachers and managers), many also provided insights about multiple categories drawing on different experiences with their older children, their past employment places, stories from their social circle, or cases where teachers were also parents. For this reason, numerical shortages in some categories do not indicate that data saturation was not reached.

Under public institutions, the field included independent public preschools, nursery classes within other levels of public schools, municipal day care centers run by metropolitan or district municipalities, and 4–6-year-old Qur'an courses under PRA. Private schools, as previously mentioned, included day care centers (for ages 0–6, with kindergarten curriculum under MoNE

after 3) affiliated with the MoFSS, as well as independent private preschools or nursery classes serving ages 3–6 under MoNE. One of the private schools I encountered in the field appeared to be a private MoNE preschool and was implementing a special educational method. However, when I inquired further, the administrator explained that they could not affiliate with the MoNE because they were unable to meet the ministry's procedural requirements financially. Officially, they are registered under the MoFSS as a playhouse, yet they provide preschool education, which can be interpreted as illegal since preschool education activities should be inspected by the MoNE.

I interviewed 27 recipient mothers whose children attended any of these ECEC institutions and 23 provider teachers or managers. In total, I gathered information from 50 informants, 23 from public institutions and 27 from private institutions, the distribution of which by governing body can be seen in Table 3.1. Yet, many informants did not limit their accounts to a single school. They also shared insights from changing schools, enrolling older children elsewhere in the past, visiting other schools prior to enrollment, working in different institutions, or hearing about schools through their own social circles, which indicates that the numbers in the table are indicative rather than exhaustive.

Table 3.1 Distribution of interviewees by the governing institutions of their schools.

	Public			Private		Total
	MoNE	Municipality	PRA	Mone	MoFSS	
Provider	5	1	6	8	3	23
Recipient	3	3	5	11	5	27
Total	8	4	11	19	8	50

SOURCE Fieldwork data (2022-2025).

As for informants' own demographic characteristics, all were women, aged between 29 and 42, with a median age of 34, within the middle-income range. Among parents, educational backgrounds included one middle school graduate, one high school graduate, one associate degree holder, 17 bachelor's degrees, five master's degrees, and 2 PhDs. Among providers, one held an associate degree, 18 bachelor's degrees, and four master's degrees. With only two

exceptions, a high level of education generally indicates that informants possess high cultural capital. However, among parents, only 16 out of 27 were employed, while the remaining 11 identified themselves as housewives.

There were points where interviewees' schools overlapped, for cases such as parents whose children attended the same preschool or an informant who was the manager of the preschool where another one's child attended. For this reason, when duplicate schools are removed, the number of preschools formally discussed in the study is 44. I did not conduct interviews with parents on school premises; instead, I asked them to describe their schools. With providers, I generally aimed to hold interviews at their schools to allow for on-site observation of conditions, although a few had to be conducted online due to access constraints. In total, I personally visited 17 schools.

I classified schools as secular or religious according to whether they offered religious education (see Table 3.2). However, there are still complex situations. For example, I placed a private school in the secular category because it did not provide religious education, even though its founder had a religious habitus. In public kindergartens, religious education is provided either at the initiative of the teacher or as a result of a protocol with the PRA on a project basis. If religious education was not provided during the academic year I conducted the interviews, I classified these schools as secular, even if the teacher had a religious habitus or a protocol had been implemented in a previous period.

Table 3.2 Distribution of orientation of preschools by the governing institutions.

	Public			Private		Total
	MoNE	Municipality	PRA	Mone	MoFSS	
Secular	5	4	0	6	1	16
Religious	3	0	9	11	5	28
Total	8	4	9	17	6	44

SOURCE Fieldwork data (2022-2025).

Regarding the zero values in the table, the municipal preschools I discussed were all run by municipalities affiliated with the Republican People's Party (RPP) and did not provide any religious education. In contrast, all courses

under the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) offered religious education, in line with the purposes for which they were established.

I scored the neighborhoods where the schools were located, which did not always coincide with the districts where the parents resided, based on the socio-economic status (SES) dataset provided by Istanbul University, ranging from A+ to E. The number of participant neighborhoods with an A or A+ score was 13; B and B+ totaled 15; C and C+ totaled 11; D accounted for 2; and E for 3. In public schools, institutional standards generally reflected the neighborhood's SES score. In contrast, the opposite was sometimes observed in private schools, for example, a high-fee private preschool located in a low-SES neighborhood attracting children from nearby gentrified areas.

In the public sector, services are offered both as half-day nursery classes and as full-day independent preschools, while in the private sector, schools operate across a wide spectrum in terms of physical conditions, materials, and educational methods. As a result, preschool fees in the field vary considerably. However, due to the sudden inflation experienced in the country, sharing school fees in monetary terms could lead to misunderstandings. For example, while in 2022 the monthly fee for a mid-range private preschool might have been around 3,000 TL and for a high-end private preschool around 10,000 TL, by 2025 these amounts had increased by as much as tenfold. For this reason, I chose to present school fees as a scale rather than as exact figures. Preschools charging only a nominal fee, such as public preschool classes and PRA courses, were rated as low (n=17); full-day independent public preschools that charged significantly more than the nominal fee but less than the cost of a private preschool were rated as medium (n=5); mid-range private preschools were rated as high (n=7); and finally, private preschools offering a specialized educational method were classified as very high (n=15).

I conducted interviews with teachers and administrators at their schools, if there was no access issue. These took place in various spaces such as classrooms during or after lessons, principals' offices, psychologists' rooms, libraries, and cafeterias. After the interviews, I was usually shown around parts of the school where students were not present, such as classrooms, playgrounds, and nap rooms. Arranging interviews with teachers in public schools was relatively easy, as they worked half days. In private schools, however, I generally

needed to interview administrators because teachers were busy until the end of the day.

Parent interviews took place either in their homes or, more often, online. I believe that the researcher's identity and appearance had an influence during the interviews. In particular, institutions providing religious education seemed to speak more comfortably with a researcher with a headscarf. The reverse was also true for me as a researcher: I found it easier to talk with people who appeared closer to my own habitus, both in terms of education level and religious orientation, whereas when speaking with those who were different from me, I was careful to avoid sounding judgmental while trying to gather information, aware of the possibility of being misunderstood.

I refer to participants by pseudonyms, which protects their anonymity while allowing the text to remain fluent and accessible. These pseudonyms were selected from the most common Turkish female names corresponding to the years of birth (1985–1995) of the informants, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) database. This approach preserves anonymity by reflecting the naming traditions of the participants' generation, while maintaining contextual relevance without revealing their identities. Additional contextual information, such as age, title, and school type, is provided in parentheses at the end of the quotations (e.g., Beyza, 36, teacher, public preschool). Table 3.3 provides the informant profile, including pseudonym, age, education level, professional title, affiliated institution, school type, school perspective, school price, and SES. A more detailed table, which additionally lists participants' professions, occupations, and the districts and neighborhoods of their affiliated schools, is included in Appendix A. In addition, when referring to schools, I chose to use nature-inspired Turkish names, such as Erguvan Kindergarten. When mentioning religious communities that appeared several times, I referred to them with an irrelevant single letter, such as L Community.

Table 3.3 Informant profile overview.

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Title	Affiliated Institution	School Type	School Perspective	School Price	SES
Feyza	32	B.A.	Manager	MoNE	Private	Religious	High	B+
Beyza	36	B.A.	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Secular	Low	A+
Gamze	35	B.A.	Teacher	IMM	Public	Secular	Low	C+
Melike	34	B.A.	Manager	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very high	C+
Hazal	32	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	A
Neslihan	35	Ph.D.	Academic	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	C+
Zehra	27	M.A.	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	A
Şerife	32	B.A.	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	A
Emine	35	High Sch.	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	A
Sevgi	27	B.A.	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	B+
Mehtap	32	B.A.	Manager	MoFSS	Private	Religious	High	B
Sevde	33	M.A.	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Religious	High	D
Hülya	35	M.A.	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Religious	Low	E
Melek	34	M.A.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	B+
Meltem	34	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very high	C+
Filiz	32	B.A.	Teacher	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very high	B+
Selma	27	B.A.	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Secular	Medium	A
Cansu	39	B.A.	Manager	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	B
Gülay	40	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very high	B+
Nazlı	33	Ph.D.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very high	B
Özge	27	M.A.	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Secular	Medium	C+
Yeliz	31	B.A.	Parent	IMM	Public	Secular	Low	C+
Halime	30	M.A.	Manager	MoNE	Private	Religious	High	B
Serap	45	B.A.	Teacher	MoNE	Private	Religious	High	B
Funda	39	B.A.	Manager	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	A+
Leyla	40	B.A.	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Religious	Low	E
Gizem	30	B.A.	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	C
Esra	37	B.A.	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	C
Meral	32	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Public	Secular	Medium	B
Zeliha	35	B.A.	Teacher	MoFSS	Private	Secular	High	A+
Gülşah	35	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Public	Religious	Medium	A
Berra	35	B.A.	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Religious	Very high	A

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Title	Affiliated Institution	School Type	School Perspective	School Price	SES
Bahar	34	B.A.	Parent	Municipality	Public	Secular	Low	B+
Aynur	44	A.A.	Teacher	MoFSS	Private	Religious	High	B
Hatice	34	A.A.	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	B
Şükran	37	B.A.	Teacher	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	A
Demet	33	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Public	Secular	Medium	C+
Canan	32	B.A.	Parent	Municipality	Public	Secular	Low	A+
Arzu	39	B.A.	Manager	MoFSS	Private	Religious	Very high	B+
Sümeyye	39	B.A.	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	E
İlknur	29	B.A.	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	C+
Cemile	35	Mid. Sch.	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	C+
Büşra	42	B.A.	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	E
Derya	32	M.A.	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Secular	Very high	B
Dilek	29	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	B
Elif	29	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	B
Didem	31	M.A.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very high	B
Yasemin	29	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	High	D
Gülsüm	29	M.A.	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Religious	Very high	B
Nurgül	31	B.A.	Parent	MoNE	Public	Religious	Low	A
Focus group	40	N/A	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very high	A

SOURCE Fieldwork data (2022-2025).

§ 3.3 Data Analysis

The process of data collection and analysis did not progress in a strictly linear fashion. In the preliminary interviews, alongside questions about parents' experiences and expectations in ECEC settings, I also focused more on the delegation of child care responsibilities and the emotional dimensions of motherhood. In the main study, however, my questions and follow-up questions increasingly addressed the services offered in schools, their strategies of access to schools of choice, perceived shortcomings in the ECEC field, connections to parents' own educational backgrounds, and the balance between their habitus and the institutions they chose. This process unfolded dynamically, as I was simultaneously analyzing the data and working to position it within the theoretical framework. I analyzed the data with the thematic analysis approach, using MAXQDA software to organize the transcripts, code them myself, structure and refine the coding system, and easily retrieve related codes during the analysis process.

Thematic analysis is a flexible method used to analyze qualitative data that involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process typically begins with repeated readings of the transcripts to familiarize the researcher with the data, followed by the creation of initial codes that capture important features related to the research questions. These codes are then compiled and organized into potential themes, which are reviewed and refined by comparing them with both the coded excerpts and the entire data set. The final stage involves transforming determined themes into a coherent narrative that explains how they relate to each other and to the broader theoretical framework.

While developing themes, researchers can be flexible and not restricted by predetermined themes, and themes are not supposed to be objective realities independent of the researcher's subjectivity and interpretation, as Terry et al. (2017) put it clearly

> Themes are developed from coding and working with the data and codes, rather than pre-existing the coding process. They are the

> outcome of the analytic process, rather than a starting point. They are not imagined or anticipated early on, and do not drive analytic direction. Coding and theme development are assumed to be subjective and interpretative processes. This means the outcomes of these processes can be stronger or weaker, but they cannot be right or wrong in any objective sense. The analysis is seen as something created by the researcher, at the intersection of the data, their theoretical and conceptual frameworks, disciplinary knowledge, and research skills and experience; it is not seen as something waiting 'in' the data to be found. (Terry et al., 2017, p. 20)

Therefore, my process of thematic analysis, from descriptive coding to generating concepts, themes, and a theoretical outcome, occurred within relation to my personal background and academic interpretation.

The coding of interview transcripts took place in two stages. When I first began the fieldwork, the theoretical framework had not yet been fully established. For this reason, my initial coding followed a more inductive, "bottom-up" approach aimed at identifying what was present in the data. At this stage, I primarily conducted semantic coding, assigning explicit meanings (Terry et al., 2017), using descriptive, in vivo, versus, and initial coding methods (Saldaña, 2016). After engaging with Bourdieu's field theory, I carried out the second cycle of coding using a more deductive, "top-down" approach. In this phase, I applied latent codes (Terry et al., 2017) that enabled a deeper interpretation of the data in relation to the theoretical framework, encompassing concepts such as field, social class, habitus, and capital. It is worth noting that, initially, conducting unframed, detailed descriptive coding increased my familiarity with the data; however, the lack of a well-established theoretical background made the later process of determining thematic categories more challenging. To illustrate these phases of coding, I initially grouped the descriptive codes under categories such as aims of ECEC services or factors of quality ECEC from the participants' perspectives. However, when I later revisited the data through a Bourdieusian lens, I reinterpreted these categories using concepts such as capital and habitus. For instance, noting a mother's stated reason for seeking ECEC services represents descriptive coding, while connecting that reason to her social position and the forms of capital she possesses

reflects interpretive coding. Thus, I analyzed the data from this perspective, and Chapters 5 and 6 present the findings, illustrated with interview excerpts, on the themes of middle-class practices and religious value transmission, respectively.

§ 3.4 Conclusion

In sum, the methodological approach adopted in this study has aimed to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and strategies of parents, teachers, and administrators within the diverse and stratified ECEC field in Istanbul. By employing ethnographic methods, combining in-depth interviews with contextual observations, and analyzing the data through thematic coding guided by Bourdieusian concepts, the research was able to situate individual narratives within broader structural dynamics. This approach not only facilitated a nuanced understanding of how social class and religious orientations shape parental choices but also allowed for an iterative process in which theory and data continuously informed each other.

Nevertheless, certain limitations of the methodology must be acknowledged. Based on the participant profile, the study does not constitute a perfectly comparative analysis across all segments of society. Achieving this would have required a more balanced number of low-income families as well as participants from more secular backgrounds. Furthermore, while qualitative methods were the most suitable for revealing participants' perceptions, meanings, and practices in depth, the study could have been enriched by adopting a mixed-methods design. The inclusion of a complementary quantitative dataset and its analysis would have provided a broader empirical grounding and enhanced the comparative potential of the findings.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the role of the researcher's own positionality in shaping both the data collection process and its interpretation. My background as a middle-income, highly educated, and religiously oriented woman inevitably influenced the pool of participants I was able to access, as well as the dynamics of the interviews themselves. In many cases, this shared habitus facilitated rapport and trust, enabling deeper conversations. At the same time, in encounters with participants whose orientations diverged

significantly from my own, I was careful to mitigate the risk of misunderstanding or sounding judgmental, which sometimes required greater reflexive awareness during the interview process. Had I targeted my fieldwork in a way that differed significantly from my own position, I would have found it more difficult to reach participants both physically and conceptually. However, since I was like an interpretive "fish in water" that I was swimming in (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), I was able to understand, relate to, and interpret most interviewees with relative ease. This situation is a reminder that the researcher is always an effective part of the very social structures being studied. At the same time, such closeness carries risks: it can blur critical distance and make certain assumptions feel too familiar to be questioned. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to adopt a reflexive attitude to filter my closeness, always putting on my researcher "goggles." For this reason, understanding never meant agreeing or defending; likewise, revealing contested findings never meant disagreeing or condemning within the scope of this academic work.

4

Setting the Game: How ECEC Policy Structures the Field

Analyzing the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) field in Türkiye requires a critical lens that examines the interplay between individual agency and structural forces. As Lareau (2011) points out, empirical research often lacks Bourdieu's "'double vision' model, which emphasizes the simultaneous examination of individual practices and the larger social structures that shape them" (p. 428). This can lead to an incomplete understanding of how choices and actions are situated within and constrained by larger systemic forces. Inspired by Bourdieu's field theory, this chapter focuses on the supply dynamics of the ECEC field in Türkiye and sheds light on the structuration side of the double vision before chapters five and six that deal with the demand-side practices of parents.

Through Bourdieu's lens, it becomes clear that parents' choices and practices in the ECEC sector are not merely individual decisions but are deeply embedded in their habitus, which are internalized dispositions shaped by life experiences and in the broader structures of the field in which they operate. As Bourdieu emphasizes, the value of the capital that individuals possess, economic, cultural, and social, is not intrinsic but derives its meaning and utility from the field in which it is mobilized (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, understanding the rules, norms, and structures of the ECEC field is essential for comprehending how parents navigate this field.

This section discusses the structural elements of the ECEC field in Türkiye through the historical development, legal basis, and terms of service of the public and private institutions involved in the current mixed economy. Specifically, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS), the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) and district municipalities, and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) are the main governing institutions operating in Istanbul, where the fieldwork was conducted. These institutions set the stage for a complex ECEC market in Istanbul, shaping the rules of the game with educators and administrators. Topics covered include application and admission processes to ECEC institutions, types of services categorized by hours of care or targeted age groups, and physical conditions of schools. Also, issues intersecting with the economic sphere, such as ever-increasing private school fees that vary between schools, ever-changing public kindergarten fee policies, and teachers' salaries, are mentioned.

After 2000, there has been an exponential increase in preschool enrollment in Türkiye (Agirdag et al., 2015), especially in the 3-6 age group. The enrollment rates in the 2012-2013 educational year, which were 30.93% for 3-5 year-olds, 44.04% for 4-5 year-olds, and 55.35% for 5-year-olds, were recorded as 56.40%, 68.78%, and 95.21%, respectively, in 2022-2023 (MoNE, 2023). Although there is high participation in kindergarten, which is the year before primary school, the low schooling at earlier ages reduces the overall rates. Compared to OECD countries, Türkiye ranks third last in schooling rates for 3-5-year-olds and last in schooling rates for 0-2-year-olds (OECD, 2023b), which is far lower than expected according to the per capita income of Türkiye (Agirdag et al., 2015).

Agirdag et al. (2015), based on statistical data, showed that students from upper-class backgrounds were more likely to attend preschool education for more than one year than students from lower-class families. This finding is in line with the report published in 2017 by ERG (Education Reform Initiative) and AÇEV (Mother Child Education Foundation), which shows that both socioeconomic and cultural factors of social class, such as household income and the mother's education level, are effective in early-year schooling (AÇEV & ERG, 2017). However, it can be argued that this result should also be

associated with the lack of adequate public service provision beyond social and cultural differences between classes. In 2023, the population of children aged 3-5 years in Istanbul totaled 611,344 (TÜİK), while the available public kindergartens and nursery classes totaled only 2,736 (4,997 including private schools) (TÜİK, 2024b), indicating a significant shortfall in meeting the demand for early childhood education facilities. This is an indicator of the intersection of the field of ECEC with several other fields, which can be named political, policy, or state fields, in addition to social class.

Neoliberal conservative policies in the political field influence the ECEC sector. The neoliberal state, while in retreat, tends to leave responsibility for services to the private sphere, which includes the family and private sector. Yazıcı (2012) points out the JDP's neoliberal policies, which leave the responsibility of care to (women members of) families. In this respect, supporting a "three-generational family" in which all vulnerable members are supposed to be cared for within the extended family, i.e., the elderly cared for by younger women and children cared for by grandmothers (Yazıcı, 2012), can indicate a strategy to replace/meet the need for institutional care services. With the shift in the structure of urban society towards the nuclear family, relying solely on traditional care solutions has become increasingly impractical, necessitating the expansion of institutional care options for households. Despite this, when public institutional services still do not meet the needs in terms of quality and quantity, the private sector becomes a dominant actor in the field. As is seen in the lack of sufficient public ECEC centers, especially for children under three, state policies shape the structure through their absence as well as their presence. Apple (2013) also argues that policies that failed or never existed at all "left a vacuum" to be filled by the private sector. He points to Ball's example of India,

> where chains of private schools are making significant inroads in part because state schools are either not there or are all too often so underresourced and overly bureaucratic that the only seemingly real alternative is a school provided through market initiatives. (Apple, 2013, p. 212)

Similarly, in Türkiye, there is insufficient public service supply to meet this demand for ECEC, especially in big cities such as Istanbul, and the rising number of private schools can be a sign of this.

Before looking at the functioning of ECEC services, it is first necessary to portray what services are currently being supplied. This sector, where both public and private institutions provide services, is more complex than other education sectors as it is also care-oriented. Thus, more diverse organizations operate in the ECEC field. For this reason, institutional players have been mapped by their spheres of influence and responsibility in order to see what kind of game structure they have created in this sector.

§ 4.1 The Governing Institutions in the Field of ECEC

The official institutions providing care and education for children aged 0-6 in Türkiye are as follows. Public or private independent kindergartens affiliated with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), nursery classes affiliated with other MoNE schools, private day care centers affiliated with the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS), public child activity centers and nurseries affiliated with local governments, and public 4-6-year-old Qur'an courses affiliated with the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA)[1]. These institutions differ in terms of eligibility requirements, working hours, qualifications of teachers, physical standards of the schools, and prices, which determine their intersection with the demand side.

4.1.1 *Ministry of National Education*

The modern understanding of center-based child care and education, attached to child development, physical and moral education, and game-playing rather than religious education, emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century. The father of the term "kindergarten," Friedrich Fröbel, established the first school for little children, providing game-based activities in Germany (Cubberly, 1920, p. 382). This new ECEC perspective emerged in the Ottoman Empire in

[1] In the context of this dissertation, institutions providing "special education" and nurseries attached to workplaces are excluded.

the era of Tanzimat. The first practitioners were non-Muslim minority communities. On the eve of the second constitutional era, private Turkish kindergartens began to be opened and increased in number after the Balkan wars (Türk, 2011). The issue of kindergartens was also included in the agenda of the ruling party, the Party of Union and Progress. The party's aim was mainly to raise loyal Turkish children beginning from early childhood as a rival to minority schools (Toran, 2012). In this manner, required legal regulations were enacted in 1913, and ten kindergartens were planned to be opened by the state in certain districts of Istanbul in 1914 (Deretarla Gül, 2008). Additionally, the preschool regulations were completed in 1915, and a preschool department was added to the teacher training school in the 1914-1915 academic year, operating for the following five years.

In the course of founding the republic, there were 80 kindergartens with 5880 students in 38 cities of Türkiye (Oktay, 1983). However, in the first years of the Turkish Republic, early childhood education was mostly left to families and private institutions since the limited budget was used for primary education expenditures (Oktay, 1983). A significant attempt of the state was to open teacher education institutions. The first one was opened in Ankara in 1927 (Öztürk, 2001); nevertheless, it had to be closed two years later due to restricted resources. Istanbul Municipality opened several kindergartens for working poor women only in 1932 (Deretarla Gül, 2008). In the following two decades, the subject was not on the agenda of the governments. The social need for early childhood care became clear in the 1960s following urbanization, domestic migration, an increasing rate of participation of women in the labor market, and a related change in the family structure (Toran, 2012). Accordingly, the first ad hoc legal regulations on kindergartens and nursery classes were promulgated in the official gazette in 1962, specifying obligatory physical standards of the schools, application requirements, qualifications of managers and teachers, and working hours (222 Sayılı İlköğretim ve Eğitim Kanunu, 1962). In the Basic Law of National Education No. 1739, which was enacted in 1973, in keeping with the general objectives of raising citizens according to the Kemalist principles, the objectives and duties of preschool education were defined as providing opportunities for physical, mental, and emotional development for children, preparing them for the primary

education, teaching them to speak Turkish properly by prioritizing the children from low socio-economic environments (Milli Eğitim Temel Kanunu, 1973). In the 1980s and 1990s, the emphasis on preschool education could be seen in certain issues of Development Plans by the SPO and the councils of the Ministry of National Education. The fourteenth council, which met in September 1993, was specifically concerned with preschool education. The ministry encouraged and supported third parties, such as local governments, nonprofit foundations, religious institutions, and private entrepreneurs, to provide preschool education. In addition, the "build-operate-transfer" model was mentioned for the ECEC provision (XIV. Milli Eğitim Şurası, 1993). In 1992, the responsibility for preschool education was given to the General Directorate for Preschool Education under MoNE, established with Law No. 3797 (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığının Teşkilat, 1992), and then it was transferred to the General Directorate for Basic Education under MoNE in 2011 with a decree-law (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığının Teşkilat, 2011).

In 2014, the Ministry of National Education merged the Regulation on Preschool Education Institutions and the Regulation on Primary Education Institutions into a single regulation (Okul Öncesi Eğitim ve İlköğretim Kurumları Yönetmeliği, 2014). That same year, the Department of Early Childhood Education was established within the Directorate General. The new regulation limited class hours for all educational institutions to six and made double-shift education mandatory, aiming to maximize the use of existing physical facilities. Kindergartens were explicitly redefined as educational institutions rather than child care. However, this half-day system has proven insufficient to meet the child care needs of working mothers. This regulation states that public kindergartens are free of charge, but parents may be charged fees for nutrition, cleaning, and educational materials. The fee amount cannot exceed the ceiling price set annually by the Provincial Fee Determination Commission.

After 2017, making preschool education mandatory became a prominent issue, supported by the Ministry of National Education's 2023 Education Vision, and pilot programs were launched in some regions (Özer et al., 2021). However, as of 2024, this has not yet been implemented. A 2019 legislative amendment raised the primary school starting age to 69 months, and thus,

kindergartens began enrolling children aged 36-68 months, while nursery classes within other schools started enrolling children aged 57-68 months. However, public kindergartens prioritized children aged 5-6, while the enrollment of three and four-year-olds depended on the schools' physical capacities. Additionally, the regulatory change abolished the requirement for double-shift kindergarten education, paving the way for full-day education in schools with adequate facilities. Then, in 2023, single education was adopted as the norm, and double-shift education was introduced if there were too many students. However, since the 6-hour class time rule for one-shift education remains unchanged, it needs to be supplemented with additional paid club activities in the afternoon in order to be full-time.

Preschool education institutions affiliated with the Ministry of National Education consist of both public and private institutions. Public preschool education is delivered through three distinct types of institutions: kindergartens, nursery classes, and application classes. Teachers for these schools are appointed by the state, and in cases where there is a shortage of teachers, paid substitute teachers may be hired. Enrollment is open to students residing within the designated school district of these public institutions.

Independent kindergartens are standalone facilities that serve children aged 36-68 months. These schools can provide full-day services with afternoon club activities after the regular class hours have ended. They provide a more advantageous service with longer care hours, along with buildings and playgrounds designed specifically for early childhood. However, due to their higher fees compared to other public schools, these institutions are primarily chosen by middle-income families rather than disadvantaged segments of society, thus becoming an alternative to private schools. According to the regulation, these schools can enroll students from the age of three; however, the priority classes for 4-5-year-olds often fill the school capacities in crowded cities like Istanbul, making it impossible to provide this service effectively.

Nursery classes were typically attached to primary schools or, in some cases, to secondary or tertiary schools. Being part of larger schools can pose physical and logistical challenges for these classes. Sharing playgrounds with older students can be risky for kindergarteners, and they may not fully benefit from the school's psychological counseling services. However, a regulation in

2024 stipulated that nursery classes should only be opened within primary schools unless they are part of an application class. These classes provide preschool education to children aged 57-68 months. In 2022, the then-Minister of National Education, under the UNICEF-supported project "10,000 Schools in Basic Education," promised to build 3,000 new independent kindergartens within a year (MoNE, 2022a). By the end of the year, it was claimed that 2,321 independent kindergartens had been completed (MoNE, 2022b). However, the implementation mainly involved converting existing nursery classes in other schools into kindergartens simply by putting up a sign. Subsequently, the next minister revised the regulation in 2024 regarding the opening, closing, and naming of kindergartens, converting these kindergartens back into nursery classes.

Application classes are nursery classes connected to vocational high schools that focus on child development and education. These classes serve as practical training grounds for high school students studying child development, providing them with hands-on experience while also offering preschool education to young children. Intern students can partially fulfill the role of assistant teachers for these classes, which is mostly needed by public school teachers.

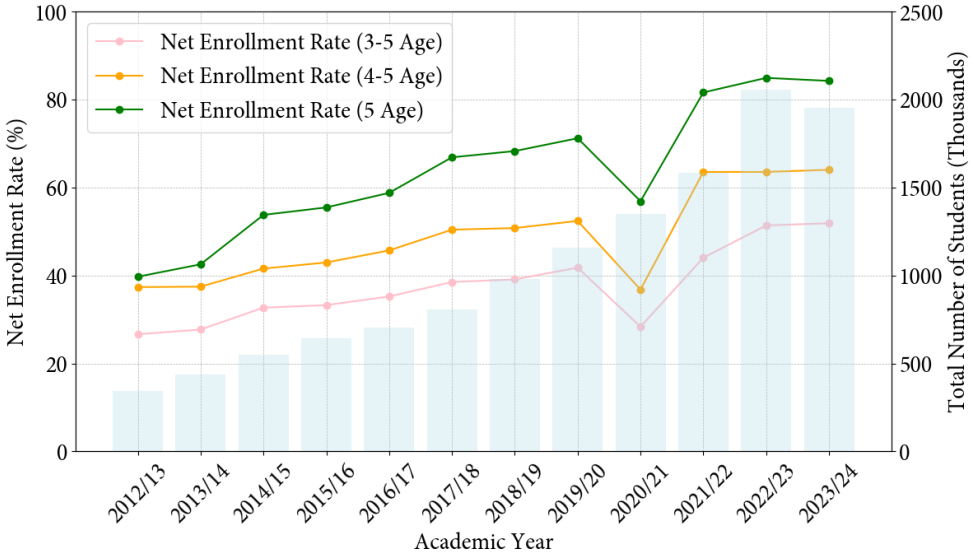


Figure 4.1 Net enrollment rates and number of students aged 3-5 by year. SOURCE: *Generated using AI tools based on MoNE Statistics (2024).*

Figure 4.1. shows the 10-year course net enrollment rates and the total number of students in preschool education. Excluding the decline during the pandemic period, the steady rise until 2023 has seen a slight decline in the past year. In addition, the detailed values in Table 4.1 highlight the divergence between the number of public and private schools. On the public preschool side, the number of institutions affiliated with the Ministry of National Education decreased from 26,539 in 2022/23 to 25,607 in 2023/24, while the total number of students dropped from 1,518,567 to 1,437,008. Independent kindergartens and nursery classes also experienced declines, indicating potential capacity issues or shifting demographics. However, community-based institutions, which are 4-6-year-old Qur'an courses affiliated with the Presidency of Religious Affairs and day care centers opened by municipalities or associations, saw a slight increase in the number of schools despite a reduction in student enrollment. On the other hand, private institutions saw mixed trends; while the number of private pre-primary schools increased from 7,871 to 8,401, the total student enrollment decreased on the private side, too.

Table 4.1 Number of schools and students in the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years.

Type of School	Number of Schools/Institutions		Number of Students	
	2022/23	2023/24	2022/23	2023/24
Pre-primary education (Public)	31,955	31,556	1,681,705	1,600,976
Institutions aff. with the MoNE	26,539	25,607	1,518,567	1,437,008
Independent Kindergartens	6,300	6,097	859,549	793,520
Nursery Classes	20,239	19,510	659,910	598,125
Community-based institutions	5,244	5,306	154,417	122,506
Pre-primary education (Private)	7,871	8,401	373,645	353,226
Institutions aff. with the MoNE	5,596	6,091	287,803	271,410
Kindergartens	4,253	4,510	222,314	215,528
Nursery Classes	1,343	1,581	65,489	55,882
Institutions aff. with the MoFSS	2,267	2,298	85,541	81,465

SOURCE (MoNE, 2023, 2024).

This decline in the number of public schools has been interpreted by some academics as the state closing kindergartens and preschools and slowing down or stopping services at this stage of education, which is not compulsory in the first place (Nasuhbeyoğlu, 2024). However, this may also be related to the closure of nursery classes attached to schools other than primary schools and institutions labeled as kindergartens, which are foreseen to be closed with the new regulation. The decline in school enrollment might be related to the inability of families to afford the dramatically increased prices of private schools and the reintroduced fees for public schools in the context of the economic crisis. Under the heading of community-based institutions, the increase in the number of institutions and students in PRA and municipal day care centers may also be related to this economic challenge. However, the increase in the number of private schools despite the decline in the number of students shows that there are still families who can afford the high fees. This can be interpreted as an indicator that the economic gap in society is increasing. One reason families are compelled to prefer private schools is their operating hours. Since the number of public schools offering full-day services is very limited, working families find solutions in private schools that fit their budgets.

4.1.2 *Ministry of Family and Social Services*

Currently, the Ministry of Family and Social Services oversees day care centers and nurseries, but the parent ministry has changed frequently throughout the history of the Republic. Initially established in 1966 by Regulation No. 12240 under the then Ministry of Health and Social Assistance, these centers aimed to "address family issues brought by changing life conditions, economic, and social environments, and to improve the welfare of children and families" for working mothers (Kreş ve Gündüz Bakımevleri Yönetmeliği, 1966). They consist of nurseries for children aged 0-2 and day care sections providing care and education for children aged 3-6. In 1983, the administration of child care and educational services was transferred to the newly established Social Services and Child Protection Agency (Sosyal Hizmetler ve Çocuk Esirgeme Kurumu Kanunu, 1983). Most of these child care centers typically served employees of various government institutions. The establishment of private nurseries and day care centers was regulated by a separate statute in 1996 (Özel Kreş ve Gündüz Bakımevleri Hakkında Yönetmelik, 1996). In 2009, the regulation concerning day care centers was repealed (Kreş ve Gündüz Bakımevleri Yönetmeliğinin Yürürlükten Kaldırılmasına Dair Yönetmelik, 2009), leaving only provisions for private ones in the legislation, and child care facilities affiliated with official institutions continued to be regulated under the Labor Law. In 2011, the administration of private nurseries and day care centers was taken over by the newly established Ministry of Family and Social Policies. This ministry was reorganized in 2018 as the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services, and in 2021, it was renamed the Ministry of Family and Social Services.

The current relevant regulation in force outlines the requirements for establishing private nurseries and day care centers, including specifications for founders, buildings, surroundings, gardens, sleeping and play areas, administrators, and staff, as well as rules for registration and fees. While the Ministry of Family and Social Services is responsible for monitoring these conditions, the educational programs implemented are subject to the supervision of the Ministry of National Education (Özel Kreş ve Gündüz Bakımevleri Hakkında Yönetmelik, 2015).

There are 2,310 private nurseries and day care centers affiliated with the Ministry of Family and Social Services in Türkiye, with 155 of them located in

Istanbul (MoNE, 2024a). This highlights that the number of institutions providing care for the 0-2 age group is very limited relative to the population, aligning with data showing that Türkiye ranks last among OECD countries in enrollment rates for this age group.

4.1.3 *Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality*

In order to address the problem of insufficient early childhood education and care institutions at the local level, the proposal to establish neighborhood nurseries has been put forward, with a call to local governments for organization and to the central government for sustainable financing (Sosyal Politika Forumu, 2009). Promises to open nurseries were made by politicians from different parties (IMM, 2015). However, before the 2019 local elections, this emphasis became more concrete in the promises of the RPP Istanbul candidate, who used the "150 Nurseries for 150 Neighborhoods" slogan. The serious commitment made in the political field on this issue was positively received by early childhood educators (Göl-Güven, 2024). After being elected, the new mayor kept his promise and opened ECEC centers under the name of Child Activity Centers affiliated with the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality in many disadvantaged neighborhoods. Initially, services were provided through 20 Child Activity Centers opened during the 2020-2021 service period. By February 2025, the number of centers had increased to 111. These centers aim to support the physical and psychosocial development of children aged 3-6 residing in Istanbul. The centers operate between 07:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., with extended hours available until 7:00 p.m. for working families. The centers provide services in two categories: paid and free, with a focus on ensuring equal opportunity by prioritizing impoverished and disadvantaged children. Enrollment is determined automatically based on criteria such as reported income during the preliminary application phase, the presence of a disabled individual in the household, and being a child of a martyr or veteran. The system prioritizes the most disadvantaged children, and applicants are required to provide documents to verify the information submitted. Half of the total capacity of the centers is allocated for paid services, while the other half is free (IMM, n.d.). The educational curriculum for these new IMM nurseries was developed in the summer of 2019 through meetings held with various

stakeholders (such as NGOs, universities, and local governments) and with the support of academics from the Boğaziçi University Early Childhood Education program (Göl-Güven, 2024).

The Child Activity Centers, however, recently faced a legal crisis regarding municipalities due to the educational program offered in addition to care services. In November 2024, the Ministry of National Education sent an official letter to the General Directorate of Local Governments under the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization, and Climate Change regarding the inspection of centers providing kindergarten education under the name of nurseries. The Ministry of Environment then sent warning letters to the relevant institutions, particularly targeting the RPP-led Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM). The legal basis for the Ministry's action was a Constitutional Court ruling dated January 24, 2007, with decision number 2005/95, which annulled the provision in Article 5395 of the Municipality Law stating that "[Municipalities] can establish preschool education institutions." Since the Constitution undertakes the unity of education and gives the authority to the Ministry of National Education, any institutional educational activity outside the control of the MoNE becomes unconstitutional. Ironically, it was revealed that the Constitutional Court's decision in 2007 was made following an objection filed by the RPP against the openings of nurseries affiliated with JDP municipalities. The annulment of the article regarding preschool education in the Municipality Law, which was initially vetoed by the then-President Ahmet Necdet Sezer but subsequently approved again by the Parliament and taken to the Constitutional Court, was justified by the court as follows: "[...] assigning municipalities duties in preschool education does not align with the principle of educational unity, which aims for the secularization and centralized implementation of education, the goal of national unity, and the democratic, secular, equitable, fair, functional, and scientific foundations of education, as well as the spirit of the Constitution that is based on Atatürk's principles and reforms." As seen, the initial reason was the anxiety about the content of the uncontrolled education provided by a religion-affiliated local government. However, no more than twenty years later, changing power relations in the political field set the scene for the implementation of the same legal regulation, this time with the shifting positions of the actors.

4.1.4 *Presidency of Religious Affairs*

The provision of religious education in early childhood dates back to the first Islamic states. In the Ottoman Empire, institutions known as "*sıbyan mektebi*" provided basic religious education to children from the age of 4, teaching them reading, writing, Qur'an recitation, memorization, and the life of the Prophet alongside fundamental religious knowledge (Kaymakcan, 2021). In the early years of the Republic, religious education in Arabic script was prohibited, and the religious courses provided from grade 3 onwards were removed from the school curriculum in 1936. In 1948, religious education was reintroduced as an elective course, and it became a core subject in the curriculum from 1950 onwards. However, during that period, there was no notable provision of formal religious education in the preschool years. Instead, children were given religious instruction during summer holidays in mosques. In the aftermath of the 1997 military intervention, primary education was extended to eight years, and religious courses were banned in Qur'an courses for children who had not completed 8 years of primary school and in summer courses for those below fifth grade. With the changes to the primary education system in 2012 (Kur'an Eğitim ve Öğretimine Yönelik Kurslar Yönetmeliği, 2012) and the repeal of the related regulation, the pathway for providing religious education to children was reopened (Gümrükçüoğlu et al., 2022). After this legal change, the Presidency of Religious Affairs developed the "Qur'an Courses Preschool Religious Education Project" and launched a pilot implementation in 10 provinces in the 2013-2014 academic year, and then the PRA-affiliated 4-6-year-old Qur'an courses were expanded across the country in the 2014-2015 academic year. Thus, early childhood religious education was formalized not as a part of formal (*örgün*) education but in the scope of non-formal (*yaygın*) education (Yıldırım, 2016). In the following years, in cooperation with MoNE and PRA, additional religion classes were also offered in kindergartens affiliated with MoNE in line with the consent of teachers and parents.

This process is explained by Ertem (2022) following Thelen's theoretical concept of *institutional layering*. Thelen defines institutional layering not as the radical elimination of existing institutions to replace them with new ones but as changes that emerge over time through additions to institutions. In this way, without abolishing an existing institution or making major legal changes,

new minor elements are added or changed gradually, thereby causing a slow transformation. In the end, new institutions take place in the relevant field as new, equivalent layers to old ones. Ertem (2022) evaluates the integration of PRA-affiliated 4-6-year-old Qur'an Courses into the preschool education system from this perspective. Without altering the curriculum or educational system of MoNE kindergartens, the gradual legal preparations for the establishment of religious schools serving the same age group, comparable to kindergartens, signify the addition of a new layer to the ECEC field. The principle of unity in education in the Turkish constitution was de facto altered through the establishment of a parallel institution (Ertem, 2022, p. 373). Therefore, even if these Qur'an courses are not "preschools" under the supervision of the MoNE, it can be said that they serve in the scope of the ECEC sector, both in terms of their target group (4-6 aged children) and the content of their education (including preschool activities in addition to Qur'an and values education). In fact, the PRA administration considers these courses as "a kind of kindergarten (*bir nevi kreş*)", too (Uyar, 2022). This perspective is reinforced by the statement of the Director-General of Educational Services at the Presidency of Religious Affairs: "We have developed a program called Complementary Acquisitions that stimulates the motor and cognitive development of children and helps them acquire essential skills. As a result, Qur'an courses for 4-6-year-olds have been designed to function in the format of preschool education" (Anadolu Ajansı, 2023). Some critics argue that labeling them as courses instead of preschools is a tactic to offer religious education without adhering to the secular education regulations established by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) (Ertem, 2022).

In the 2020-21 academic year, there were 4,437 Qur'an courses for the 4-6 age group, with a total of 105,369 students enrolled nationwide (PRA, 2022). By the 2022-23 academic year, the number of these courses increased to 5,988, and the enrollment surged to 208,936 students (PRA, 2024). This represents a remarkable growth in the provision and uptake of these courses. Specifically, the number of Qur'an courses rose by approximately 35%, while student enrollment more than doubled, increasing by 98.3%.

Teachers for 4-6-year-old Qur'an courses are recruited through state appointments of candidates who have graduated from the Faculty of Theology

and successfully passed the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS). Additionally, they are required to complete a 380-hour certification program, including pedagogical methods and age-appropriate religious instruction specifically designed to prepare them for teaching kids in Qur'an courses, since they are not experts in early childhood education. The absence of certified preschool teachers in institutions that function as kindergartens has itself been a matter of debate. Many of the PRA teachers I interviewed stated that they found the certification program insufficient and therefore enrolled in distance-learning child development programs or attended private seminars and certificate courses.

The curriculum of the courses consists of Qur'an literacy (learning letters), religious knowledge, and complementary outcomes (adaptations from the preschool curriculum). According to Büşra, who worked in one of the first pilot courses established in Istanbul, in the early years, they had a curriculum but no textbooks. Teachers provided feedback to the local mufti's office about how engaging the content was for children. In later years, textbooks were developed: initially just a single book and a section for the Qur'anic letters, but later revised and separated by subject areas with regular updates. Having a history of roughly a decade, these courses remain subject to ongoing revisions, something that, interestingly, all participants commented on with the same expression about the Presidency of Religious Affairs: "*Kervan yolda düzülür*" (the caravan is put in order on the road, meaning things are organized and fixed along the way).

4-6-year-old Qur'an course buildings are typically established through funding provided by the PRA, local community donations, and charitable organizations. Many of these facilities are located within mosque complexes or adjacent community centers, integrating them into existing religious infrastructure. They are required to adhere to specific standards outlined by PRA, including appropriate classroom settings, safe outdoor play areas, and hygienic facilities to accommodate young children. Financial support often comes from a combination of public funding allocated to PRA and contributions from private benefactors (PRA, n.d.). Despite these efforts, there are variations in building quality and resources across different settings. In particular,

courses held within existing mosques face physical constraints such as insufficient space, inadequate classroom sizes, and limited natural lighting.

§ 4.2 Marketing ECEC

In Türkiye, early childhood education is provided within a mixed economy framework. This concept refers to systems in which multiple economic actors, including the state, for-profit private institutions, and non-profit private organizations, are involved in the provision, financing, and regulation of services (Young, 2018). Mixed economies can take different forms: either through state intervention in market systems to address capitalism's social welfare shortcomings, or through state withdrawal in favor of market forces and privatization. Both insufficient public provision and excessive reliance on the private sector represent ineffective extremes. A mixed economy is often presented as a necessity when "choosing between imperfect alternatives" (Wolf, 1993). However, maintaining a delicate balance between "private wants and public needs" is essential (Phelps, 1965).

Globally, countries vary widely in their approach to child care provision. Some countries, like France and Nordic countries, offer universal, state-funded preschool education from age two and prohibit for-profit provision. Meanwhile, English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, the United States, the UK, and New Zealand exemplify the rapid global spread of child care marketization in a mixed economy. On the other end, South Africa has fully privatized its ECEC system (Lloyd & Penn, 2012; Penn, 2009). Especially, in most parts of the UK, the ECEC market is "split between 'childcare' and 'early education'. The former mostly consists of for-profit nurseries and childminders competing for 'customers', the latter a mix of public sector schools and private providers competing for pupils in a quasi-market" (Moss, 2004, p. 633), which resembles the Turkish context.

In Türkiye, the commercialization of education has become increasingly apparent with neoliberal economic policies across all stages, including preschool (Bayram, 2018). However, parents often turn to private providers not out of preference, but necessity, particularly when public options are unavailable or insufficient. Because preschool education is not compulsory in

Türkiye, the state tends to assume less responsibility. Services for children aged 0–3 are almost entirely left to the private sector, aside from a limited number of public schools with larger capacity or municipal programs for children aged three.

The commercialization of child care brings with it a range of debates. In theory, a free market system assumes that consumers (parents) will select high-quality, cost-effective services, while providers compete by improving offerings to avoid elimination (Mitchell, 2012). Parents are assumed to seek the best ECEC options for their children, while providers aim to maximize profit (Naumann, 2011). However, in reality, the social field rarely, if not never, functions as a perfect market. Neither institutions nor parents are purely rational economic actors; instead, they operate within networks of power, mobilizing extra-economic resources and objectives. Thus, the rhetoric of equal opportunity in neoliberal systems "in practice means no more than a freedom to compete in an unequal society" (Penn, 2012, p. 22). In this competitive framework, "those middle-class parents who can exert their market power to gain a competitive advantage for their children are increasingly likely to do so, to maximize their chances of gaining access to elite institutions" (Ball, 2003, p. 20).

Thus, the most critical issue with marketing ECEC is the deep inequality in access to quality services. Socioeconomically disadvantaged families often lack the leverage to choose among competing private providers, and their children may be excluded from the benefits of early education and enter the educational system later. Furthermore, an indirect result is the burden of child care falling disproportionately on mothers in these disadvantaged families, limiting their access to employment and social participation, and thereby reinforcing gendered dimensions of class inequality (Akkan et al., 2023).

Moreover, the framing of "consumer demand" in ECEC can be problematic. The commercialization of ECEC services in a market economy turns service recipients into customers, and it positions parents as consumers, not children, as the primary service recipients. This leads to the commodification of child care and even children themselves (Brennan et al., 2012; Campbell-Barr, 2014), and treating child care as a market commodity, something to be bought

and sold, can compromise both fairness and quality since it would prioritize profit by educational institutions (Penn, 2012).

In the Turkish ECEC market, where schools operate with highly diverse characteristics, institutions employ various strategies to attract prospective families. Here, I will provide examples based on data collected from the field. Mehtap, who is the founder and manager of a private preschool affiliated with MoFSS, explains that although the MoNE curriculum is mandatory in every preschool, they promote their school by highlighting the additional educational method they implement, which is Reggio Emilia, to prospective parents. However, such promotional claims can at times be misleading. Filiz, who works at a certified Montessori school, complains about institutions that purchase Montessori materials and label themselves as such without receiving approval from an authorized certification body.

In addition to the pedagogy used, extracurricular classes also serve as distinctive promotional elements. Melike, who works as a coordinator in a very high-priced private preschool, reports that many schools, including her previous workplace, boast about offering a wide range of branch courses, but that children are overwhelmed by the bombardment of such classes. In her view, more extracurricular classes do not necessarily mean better education and may even tire children out. Similarly, Meltem, as a parent in a private preschool, criticizes how some schools emphasize their English programs to appeal to parents, even when they lack depth in other areas.

Sevde, who is a parent in a private preschool, recounts that in many of the schools she visited, administrators emphasized the naturalness of the food served as a key selling point. This reflects how schools increasingly market not only educational approaches but also lifestyle elements to attract parents. Yet, within Türkiye's economic context, access to organic food is strongly shaped by class position. Notably, Cansu, who is the manager of Waldorf-style Toprak Kindergarten, shares that while their school previously sourced organic products directly from a private farm, rising costs have forced them to switch to purchasing from a supermarket they trust.

Social media has emerged as the primary marketing tool for schools. Melike, Mehtap, and Cansu report that they actively use Instagram and that the majority of new families discover their institutions through this platform.

Özge, who works at an independent public kindergarten, even notes that the principal of her public school encourages teachers to share classroom activities online. Feyza, manager of a private kindergarten, describes Instagram as a kind of showcase, where only visually appealing or standout activities are posted, rather than a full representation of daily practices. This curated presentation enables administrators to market their schools strategically, shaping public perception in selective rather than transparent ways. Moreover, as Özge critically observes, when educational activities are framed primarily for their visual appeal and promotional potential, teachers' attention may shift away from the developmental benefits and long-term relational value of the activity toward photographing and sharing it, thus reorienting pedagogical focus from the child to the image.

Despite this commercialized approach to education, there are also institutions that strive to be child-centered rather than profit-driven. Funda, the administrator of Kehribar Preschool, a cooperative-based kindergarten, contrasts her school with mainstream private schools by saying, "If you spent a week here, you would understand the difference." She emphasizes that their school is child-centered rather than profit-driven and does not operate for financial gain because it is run within a parent solidarity network. However, in a competitive system, being anti-mainstream, using natural materials or food, avoiding profit-maximization through more students or higher fees, and employing a participatory budgeting model, can still become a marketing asset, especially among parents who appreciate and can afford such values. In other words, even being non-profit becomes part of the school's branding. This highlights how the rules of the field determine the symbolic meanings and positions that agents can hold.

All these empirical data refute the claim that the market system guarantees free choice in two ways. First, information about schools is never neutral but always constructed, selectively compiled, and presented to parents. Second, since parents' resources vary significantly, access to this information and subsequently to services cannot be equal in this system.

Another claim often made in favor of marketization in education is diversity. If all services were provided solely by the state, a common curriculum would likely fail to meet the diversity demands of different segments of society

in terms of lifestyle (horizontal cultural capital). Indeed, families with a religious habitus have historically turned to Islamic private schools or community-run preschools (and open education at higher levels) because they view the national curriculum in public schools as incompatible with their values. More recently, under the political influence of an Islamic party, i.e., Justice and Development Party (JDP), the number of public institutions providing religious education has increased. As a reaction, secular families have started turning to private schools to avoid what they see as the "religionalization of education" (Aksoy et al.). In this way, privatization seems to respond to demands for lifestyle diversity.

However, lifestyle-based choices are also vulnerable to market exploitation. For instance, Nazlı, who is committed to sending her children to religiously oriented schools, complains that schools take advantage of this desire and exploit parents. In another case, Hazal initially enrolled her first child in a private school with the help of external financial support. When this support ended, she transferred the child to a public nursery class. For her younger twins, she lacks the financial means to choose a private option. Hazal explains that, ideally, she would prefer an Islamic education for her children; however, the high cost of Islamic private schools places this option beyond her reach. Now she is satisfied to be able to enroll her twins in an IMM day care center and plans to supplement their religious education externally later on. This creates a paradox where two different segments of society, both unable to find public schools aligned with their secular or religious values, are pushed toward private institutions for similar reasons. This sensitivity becomes a tool for profit in the hands of private providers. In other words, rather than offering genuine diversity, private schools often exploit societal diversity to generate profit. Meanwhile, class stratification continues to persist across both groups.

In sum, the marketing of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Türkiye reveals the deep entanglement of education with market dynamics, where schools actively compete for visibility and appeal. From the promotion of specific pedagogical labels and extracurricular offerings to the use of curated social media content and organic food claims, institutions engage in strategic branding to attract middle-class families. However, this commodification process not only distorts the transparency and equity of ECEC services

but also reinforces class-based access to quality care. Rather than offering genuine choice, the market logic privileges those with the economic and cultural capital to navigate and evaluate these promotional claims. Consequently, ECEC becomes less about educational equity and more about institutional competitiveness, intensifying both social stratification and the parental anxieties that accompany it.

§ 4.3 Not a Free Choice But an Obligation

As of 2025, preschool education is not compulsory in Türkiye, although there have been efforts to make it so. If made compulsory, the school year in question would cover kindergarten education only one year prior to primary school. In other words, participation in child care and education between the ages of 0 and 6 is at the initiative of families for now. Understanding the motivations of families to participate in early schooling and the criteria by which they choose schools is a crucial area of research, as it provides valuable insight into social relations. Moreover, since these choices are not free of external situations, they should be analyzed in relation to political, economic, and cultural frameworks within the structural background I have provided in the above sections.

Based on the data, parents' reasons for enrolling their children in a preschool institution can be listed as follows: to use ECEC for substitute child care, enabling parents to work or take personal time; to support child development in areas such as social-emotional development and character development; to invest in academic success in primary school and beyond; and to instill national and religious values in early childhood. In this section, the first reason will be examined beyond individual preferences in the context of determining employment and class-based structures.

As a result of urbanization and nuclear-family-based living, parents have difficulty finding support for their children's care outside of professional services. It used to take a village to raise a child. However, nowadays, parents in the city can easily find themselves on their own while raising their children. Thus, institutional child care for 0-6-year-olds is primarily needed as a substitute for parents. The strongest reason for this is women's employment.

According to the results of the Household Labor Force Survey, while the employment rate of individuals in the 25-49 age group with children under the age of three in their households was 59.8% in 2014, it was 60.5% in 2022. When this rate was analyzed by gender, it was seen that the employment rate of women in the 25-49 age group with children under the age of three in their households was 28.0% in 2022, while the employment rate of men was 90.5% (TÜİK, 2024a). According to the AÇEV-ERG report mentioned earlier, 42.5% of women who are not working cannot work because they have young children, and only 13% of women who are working can access institutional services. This result is presented as evidence of a potential demand for accessible and affordable ECEC services (AÇEV & ERG, 2017). The importance of kindergartens for working families is described by Özge, a public preschool teacher, as a "savior":

> Parents are mostly aware of the importance of preschool education. But of course, because they work, it's kind of obligatory for them. Because both mom and dad work, and there's nowhere else for the child to stay during the day. For example, public schools are closed on public holidays, but private schools work even during the mid-term break. I have parents who have no one in Istanbul and have nowhere to leave their child. They have a lot of difficulties in this regard. That's why preschool is a savior, a care field at the same time (Özge, 27, teacher, public preschool)

Even if parents agree that early education and care contribute to their children, the starting age for school may still depend on working conditions. Derya, as a mother of three and a private school parent, herself trained in pre-school education, shares her motivations for sending her children to school:

> First of all, to support the child's development from a professional point of view. I can support their development at home or with their caregiver. But I think the school provides more structured, professional support. This is my first motivation. My second motivation is the conditions. For example, I can think about this support at the age of 5. I can think about it at 2 years old. What is the difference? If I start working at 2, I think at 2. If I start working at 5, I can think at 5. For

> example, my older daughter was two while I was writing my thesis for my master's degree. So it was a good opportunity for me when she went to preschool at the age of 2. With my younger daughter, I started working when she was 4 months old, so I am motivated for her to start school as soon as possible. (Derya, 32, parent, private preschool)

Therefore, institutional child care became a basic need for working parents, and to meet this need, Emine, another parent, thinks that "the state should make all kinds of institutions accessible." However, the lack of adequate full-time public ECEC service provision forces working parents, in particular, to rely on the private sector. This dependency affects not only high-income families but also low-income families, placing additional economic burdens on the latter in particular. The following encounter of Melek, who has a high socioeconomic background, with someone from a different social class addresses this situation:

> I went to the library. The woman who works there has a kid. He's three and a half years old. She asked me how much I paid for kindergarten. [And she said] "I have to send him to a private school. I am already giving half of my salary there. I wish I had something more suitable." She just wants to receive care. She has no other special criteria. May God help her in that sense. (Melek, 34, parent, private preschool)

Families who would not normally choose a private school are forced to allocate a significant portion of their income to enroll in more affordable private schools. At this point, it should be noted that the private ECEC sector is not a monolithic whole. It includes institutional preschools with much higher fees, as well as boutique preschools operating with specific educational methods, and preschools established with limited facilities in the neighborhoods. For this reason, private education does not always mean quality education. And more disadvantaged working families are stuck with lower-quality private schools that offer full-time service. Therefore, the state policy, which is based on a mixed economy, makes the private sector fill a gap and brings classed consequences. In other words, different segments of the social classes are not equally affected by the same policies.

The field of ECEC intersects not only with the state's education policies but also shares common ground with employment policies since it is a determinant of parents' working lives. Emine points to the working conditions of parents as an important determinant of the needed child care service hours and the school starting age:

> Both members of the family may be working. Honestly, I generally observe obligation. It can be a necessity in every sense. Other than that, in a country with high standards where the working conditions of mothers or fathers are lighter and sweeter, I don't think [children] would be sent [to school] at a very early age. Even if the child goes, it would be to spend 3-4 hours with peers. But when the conditions are very harsh, I think it turns into an obligation. (Emine, 35, parent, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

In fact, while the European Union's average weekly working hours are 36.1 hours, in 2024, in Türkiye, they were 44.2 hours. This makes Türkiye the country with the longest working hours among European countries (Eurostat, 2024). The impact of employment policies on working hours indirectly affects the ECEC field since parents need child care accordingly. This again shows that, despite being autonomous rule-makers, social fields have connections with other fields. These relationships are inevitable, even if they are not "defined once and for all," and need to be empirically explored in each case (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 110).

For parents with demanding work schedules, however, it may not be an ideal solution to be able to find an institution to provide child care during their long working time, either, as this means that the child will be separated from the family and home environment for longer periods of time. Gamze, a teacher working at one of the IMM Child Activity Centers, which provides a full-day service, complains about these prolonged periods of care:

> There are children who stay in school for eleven hours, and honestly, it makes me wonder why their parents even had kids in the first place. It's awful. It's awful for my working life, too. I think it is an abuse of the child. When I first got into this, my focus was on women's employment because that's how we were raised—as kids, we were taught that

> women should work and gain economic independence. And I still believe in that. But if you are a couple, one of you should go a part-time thing, so you can't get into this child business without calculating this. Back in my mom's time, most women were housewives, and that's just how it was. Not having kids wasn't even an option because there was no such mindset. Maybe if I'd been born thirty years ago, I'd feel like that. But now, I can't understand how people can see this and have the right to choose [having children] and do this and leave their children for eleven and a half hours. It makes me so angry. (Gamze, 35, teacher, municipality day care center)

Göl-Güven (2024) highlights long hours of care as an "area where the needs of the parent and the best interests of the child conflict" (p. 92) in the implementation of ECEC. While a full-time (or even extended) care service is crucial for parents who work full-time, long hours of care are particularly challenging for young children and exhausting for teachers. Gamze above holds parents responsible for this and criticizes their decision to have children in the first place, and their choice to work. When asked about the earliest age for enrolment in institutional care, Funda also expressed concerns about the well-being of the child:

> It is also related to Türkiye's conjuncture and the working system. Otherwise, if you think about it, yes, a three-year-old is still really young. Ideally, they should be spending more time with their family. But the reality is, most people's working conditions just don't allow for that. When this is the case, I approach it more from the perspective of 'What is the best possible option for the child under these circumstances?' They can be taken to school at an earlier age. But if this child stays at the day care center until 6:00 p.m. because both parents work those hours, then can we really say that this is in favor of the child? So, it's all interconnected. The system itself needs to be designed differently—working conditions need to improve, day care systems need to adapt, or companies should provide day care options for employees. It all comes down to how many resources are made available. (Funda, 39, manager, private preschool)

This time, the responsibility for balancing work schedules and child care is placed on the state and employers, not parents. In any case, it is important to underline that the length of care hours or the early age of schooling does not increase a child's well-being in a linear proportion. There is a need to improve employment policies for parents with children aged 0-6 working in both public and private institutions (Göl-Güven, 2024). It should also be taken into account that policies should avoid targeting mothers exclusively, in order to prevent the reinforcement of gendered outcomes within employment trends. This once again shows the close relationship of ECEC with the political sphere.

§ 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter examines the structuring of the early childhood education and care sector in Türkiye, analyzing how institutional arrangements, policy trends, and economic dynamics have shaped the supply side of the sector. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, it reveals how institutional actors in the field, including ministries, municipalities, religious authorities, and private providers, have historically and politically constructed the rules of the game. These rules determine how different types of capital can be transformed and mobilized to gain a position in the field.

ECEC services in Türkiye operate within a mixed economy, where the state does not provide sufficient infrastructure for either preschool education or early childhood care, leading to a growing reliance on private institutions. In recent years, the increasing involvement of municipalities, particularly in offering full-day services and including children as young as three, represents a positive development. However, these advances remain vulnerable to political contestations and shifting power dynamics, which pose significant risks to service continuity and equity. This reflects the fact that the ECEC field is not completely autonomous; rather, it is deeply entangled with adjacent fields such as employment, gender relations, religious politics, and broader state policy. For instance, the limited scope of public child care provision intersects with labor market structures in ways that disproportionately disadvantage women, often compelling families to turn to privatized alternatives. Likewise, the legal-political positioning of religious institutions demonstrates how symbolic

legitimacy can be gained not only through pedagogical capital but also through alignment with dominant ideologies in the political field. These cross-field dynamics underscore Bourdieu's point that while each field has its own logic, it is never fully isolated.

Within these structural constraints, parents' actions are far from the exercise of absolute free choice as imagined in free-market narratives. Instead, many families are obliged to adopt certain solutions due to limited alternatives. Yet their decisions are also shaped by deeper social forces, particularly their social class and habitus. Although these dispositions are in relation to broader structures, examining them more closely is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the ECEC landscape. Therefore, the next two chapters draw on field data to explore how families' socio-economic and cultural positions, focusing on middle-class parenting practices and religious habitus, shape their strategies for navigating and accessing ECEC services.

5

Classed Performance at Play: Middle-Class Practices in the ECEC Field

> *They wanted a good middle school, a good academic pathway, a good high school, and good teachers—haunted by the idea of excellence that could surround children and painlessly infuse them with individual achievement, for which they felt solely responsible.*
>
> – Annie Ernaux, *The Years*

The primary experiencers of ECEC are children, as they are the direct recipients of care and education. However, decisions about children's enrollment in preschools, along with many other everyday choices, are predominantly made by parents, mostly mothers. In today's neoliberal contexts, mothers possessing certain economic and cultural capital, the central focus of this research, are perceived as responsible for ensuring the well-being of their children, including making informed decisions about education, health, and development. On the other hand, they experience difficulties and dilemmas in providing child care in urban settings on their own, as their participation in work and social life has increased. This chapter, therefore, begins by exploring the type of mothering middle-class mothers engage in while deciding on the enrollment age and preschool options. It is referred to as "anxious mothering"

to characterize the continuous state of anxiety and guilt. This type of mothering is shaped by neoliberal subjectification, which positions mothers as individual agents accountable for optimizing their children's outcomes. Additionally, this anxiety is influenced by the proliferation of scientific knowledge and expert recommendations on children's well-being and development, as well as the mothers' own well-being and mental health. Unlike the traditional intensive mothering model, these "new-generation" mothers are also anxious about themselves since they seek to balance their personal care and psychological well-being with their parenting roles, creating a complex and layered approach to decision-making.

This chapter then examines these mothers' expectations and preferences for ECEC and reveals that these preferences are deeply shaped by their social class habitus. Middle-class habitus guides parents' perceptions of what constitutes a "good" preschool and influences their decision-making processes. Expectations such as prioritizing structured educational programs, emphasizing individual development, and promoting social and cognitive skills from an early age can be explained by Lareau's (2011) conceptualization of "concerted cultivation." However, in addition to this, due to the special position of early childhood, the favoring of natural growth and free play among parents has also been observed in the field with reference to the concept of "concerted natural growth" (Kampichler et al., 2018). These preferences are not simply arbitrary but stem from the mother's position in the social hierarchy and their desire to give their children an advantage in future areas such as education or employment. Moreover, in the ECEC process, parents not only make classed choices but also engage in performances to distinguish themselves from others, both from other social classes and from different segments within the middle class. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of *distinction*, this chapter explores how middle-class mothers' preferences reflect their efforts to express a refined and elite taste in early childhood education. Thus, their choices and practices reveal how the concept of "quality" in ECEC is not limited to functional standards but serves as a symbolic sign of social status and cultural identity. However, the economically insecure position of middle-class families can create a challenge when meeting their classed and distinctive demands in the ECEC area. Thus, the following section also discusses this entrapment

faced by middle-class families. Their cultural capital provides them with a high awareness of the importance of ECEC, but their economic capital might be insufficient to ensure full access to the ideal kindergartens they desire, even though these families are in a more advantageous position than working-class families. Therefore, the chapter concludes by examining the strategies that middle-class families use to overcome these constraints and secure what they perceive as "quality" ECEC for their children, balancing aspirations with financial realities.

§ 5.1 Anxious Mothering

At the core of institutional early childhood education and care is the delegation of these responsibilities to non-parental actors, and how this occurs is closely tied to parenting styles. Given that the period in concern is the early childhood, parenthood in this context predominantly means motherhood since "mothers who are generally positioned as retaining the ultimate responsibility for child-rearing in popular discourses and moral understandings" (Vincent, 2010, p. 110). Motherhood cannot be reduced to a single definition or static form. Instead, it is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon that evolves across diverse experiences, emotional dimensions, historical contexts, and socio-economic and cultural frameworks. It is a unique experience for each mother. Nevertheless, patterns of motherhood can be traced based on certain determinants.

Motherhood is a socially constructed practice shaped by historical contexts and individual agency rather than being solely determined by material conditions or biological factors (Glenn, 1994). Throughout history, the concepts of child and mother have been perceived differently in various contexts. Factors such as agricultural family economies, religious beliefs and rituals, and industrialization and urbanization, which introduced distinctions between home-outside and private-public, have socially constructed both different perceptions of childhood and the experience of motherhood (Chodorow, 1978; Hays, 1996). As part of this historicity, the responsibility for primary child care has been assigned to women under the notion of "motherhood," legitimized through their biological capacity to give birth and breastfeed (Glenn, 1994).

Within this framework, motherhood has been framed as women's foremost and even sacred duty, including in the Turkish context. Consequently, a discourse has emerged in which motherhood is equated exclusively with women, and womanhood is reduced to motherhood.

In addition, the neoliberal principles that became dominant in the 1980s provided a supportive context for motherhood to be "framed as a highly individualized performance" for women (Schmidt et al., 2023, p. 59). Neoliberalism, which advocates the notion that "each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being" within the freedom guaranteed by the marketplace, encompassing care areas of welfare, education, and health (Harvey, 2005, p. 65), consequently complements the idea that families, and mothers in particular, bear ultimate responsibility for child care. A similar analysis can be seen in Beck's (1992) risk society, in which the responsibility is placed on the modern individual. In this context, mothers are increasingly expected to manage early childhood care independently, reflecting a further neoliberal shift from collective, state-sponsored care to private, individualized responsibility. Mothers who are perceived as entrepreneurs taking the decisions according to risks and market economy under a neoliberal mindset experience motherhood as a "planning project" (Sadıkoğlu, 2021, p. 105)

Rich (1976) distinguishes between motherhood as an "institution", a patriarchal structure that regulates and oppresses women, and motherhood as an "experience," which can be diverse and personally meaningful. Building on this distinction, Schmidt et al. (2023) conceptualize motherhood as a social norm and differentiate it from mothering, defined as "the concrete and manifold practices of mothers" (p. 67). They emphasize that women's mothering practices in the context of these social norms are shaped by their intersectional positions, such as social class, ethnicity, family status, and educational background, in other words, by the elements that constitute their habitus. My focus is on specific mothering experiences that can be linked to middle-class practices, showing how women respond to broader social norms through classed resources and cultural expectations, as puts it, "mothering is one example of a site in which class is realised and reproduced" (p. 118).

In the 1930s, a child-centered new regime of motherhood, referred to as "intensive mothering," began to emerge, in Hays' words. This perspective suggests, especially in affluent societies, that the traditional essentials of providing food, shelter, and love are no longer considered sufficient for raising children. Hays (1996) introduces her concept of intensive mothering as an ideology that "advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children" (Hays, 1996, p. x) in a self-sacrificing manner. Although she claims that this contemporary ideology affects women from all groups, she emphasizes that there can be a class-based divide in the way it is perceived and practiced. Mothers of all social classes can aspire to "good motherhood" and aim to build a good future for their children. However, according to Hays, while working-class mothers prioritize *formal education*, try to teach children the *rules*, and expect *obedience* from them, middle-class mothers instill *self-esteem*, give them *choices*, and expect *negotiation* (Hays, 1996, p. 86). Hays also sees this self-sacrificing approach to motherhood as a resistance to the market-driven economy and likens it to Polanyi's "countermovement." Although mothers do not engage in a self-conscious and organized opposition, they can be seen as members of a culture that opposes the market through their unselfish and non-profit-seeking actions with intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996, p. 173).

However, this discourse of motherhood, which mostly emerged in the 1990s, has been seriously criticized for drawing only on observations of white middle-class mothers with able-bodied children and overlooking the experiences of non-white mothers from different socio-economic and cultural contexts (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001, p. 410; E. N. Glenn et al., 1994). As another criticism, the prevalence of intensive mothering as a means of "status safeguarding," especially by middle-class mothers seeking to invest in their children's class futures, suggests that this ideology might be less incompatible with capitalist ideologies than Hays claims (Milkie & Warner, 2014). In fact, the mindset of intensive mothering as a dominant cultural ideology that promotes a child-centered, time-intensive, and emotionally absorbing approach to parenting can easily create new marketable spaces, and institutional ECEC services are one such setting where these dynamics unfold. Just like other marketable domains, such as organic food products, high-quality children's

clothing, educational toys, and extracurricular art and sport activities, ECEC services have also emerged as commercialized spaces catering to the demands of intensive parenting. These institutions in the market increasingly offer features such as nature-based materials, specialized educational models, individualized attention, psychological support, and parental involvement programs, all designed to meet the heightened expectations of parents. When the market comes into play, social class emerges as a critical determinant of access and participation. Thus, the type of mothering, interplay with social class dynamics, and market logics, is an important component of the ECEC field.

Nevertheless, the social code of child-rearing being the mother's responsibility has become ambivalent with the increasing role of women in social and professional life. Different types of mothering have been experienced during the transition from the rural context, where mothers worked in the fields, but child care was provided by the extended family members living together, to urban life, where women managed the house and children by themselves. The situation of these urban women continuing to bear the household and child care responsibilities with limited support from the extended family does not strengthen them in increasing their participation in social and professional life. For the latter's sake, in addition to policies on child care being an important subject of debate, psychosocial issues such as the emotional burden of mothers, the responsibility they bear, and the way they evaluate themselves have also begun to be studied.

Themes such as motherly guilt (Rich, 1976) and guilt and shame of working mothers in particular (Sutherland, 2010) have been traced in the motherhood experience. It has been shown that maternal guilt is present in many national contexts, although it is experienced differently depending on political practices (Collins, 2021). Women whose social and professional lives do not allow them to devote themselves fully to their children in terms of time and energy may not be considered doing completely "intensive mothering" per se, but they still carry an "ambivalent" mental and emotional burden (Rich, 1976), empirically reported as not shared by fathers (Schmidt et al., 2023), which makes them "anxious mothers." They are not only concerned about the evaluation of their mothering performance, but especially for new middle-class mothers, their own well-being is also a matter of anxiety. For this reason, I use

the concept of anxious mothering to draw attention to mothers in the ECEC field who transfer child care to an institution, but in the process become intensely concerned about their children's social development, psychological state and academic achievement, as well as their own mental health, social and professional life as women, rather than the concept of intensive mothering, which envisages devoting all their energy and time to their children. This framing is not incidental; it aligns closely with the characteristics of middle-class subjectivity, which is often described as marked by contradiction, insecurity, and persistent anxiety. Ball notes, drawing on other scholars, "the present-day middle class is anxious rather than complacent and comfortable" (Roberts, 2001, as cited in Ball, 2003) and "if this is an elite, then, it is an insecure and deeply anxious one" (Ehrenreich, 1989, as cited in Ball, 2003). These characterizations echo a long-standing view of the middle class as caught between aspiration and precarity. Thus, anxious mothering not only captures the emotional labor involved in caregiving but also reflects the structural tensions of navigating motherhood within the wider "confidence and dread" of middle-class life (Ball, 2003, p. 4).

Therefore, the early childhood education and care sector is both a field of care responsibility transfer and a development and educational investment by parents, where anxiety constantly occupies the minds of mothers when deciding whether or not to send their child to school, selecting an appropriate school for them, and choosing what to do during school hours also affects their motherhood. Here, this anxious mothering is framed as a middle-class *practice*, though people are certainly not labeled by class, and even the term "middle-class mothers" is used for convenience. Examples are drawn from both public and private school parents.

The most evident expression of this anxiety is guilt, which can take various forms, including "personal guilt" or "social guilt" (Ball, 2005, p. 272). The mother may feel guilty towards the child for leaving them. She may have a sense of guilt towards society in general, worrying that she will be judged for not taking care of her child herself. Also, she may feel responsible for her child's behaviors at school, as a social environment, the child is involved, and question her motherhood. Especially, first-time parents can magnify the problems they face because of their lack of experience. Leyla, who herself has been

a mother for many years and returned to the profession as a public kindergarten teacher after raising her children, gives the following example of how she tells her younger and single colleagues to be more open in their communication with parents:

> Let her call —if you're not available, just say so. But don't tell parents they can't call or set strict off-duty rules. She's a mother—you don't know what she's going through. Little things come up, especially with first-time moms. Like the other day, a boy asked a girl about her genital area, "Mine is different, how is yours?"—just out of curiosity. He has a sister; he probably saw her. We already have separate restrooms; they don't see each other. But the girl told her mom, and then that mom called the boy's mom, who ended up crying, "Why would my child say that?" It was the weekend, Sunday. The mom messaged me asking if she could call. I said, "Of course." She was upset, thinking something serious had happened. But really, it was just a curious question from a young child, a natural process. She even questioned whether to send her son to school again. That's why I don't restrict communication—mothers have different needs. (Leyla, 40, teacher, public preschool)

This example illustrates how the mother takes the blame for what she believes to be inappropriate behavior on the part of her child. She feels even more ashamed because it is a sensitive issue for her. She worries to the point of considering giving up sending her child to school. According to the mother, her child is not an independent individual from her. This new mother, even though she is a public school parent, displays an overthinking and anxious motherhood.

The strongest feelings of guilt may be towards the child. Derya, who works as an academic and sends her child to a private school from the age of 2, was asked what she does when her child is at school and how she feels:

> Okay, that's a very deep point. I felt it the first time when I left my child with someone; I also felt it when I left my child at school. I mean, I feel like I can only leave my child somewhere for my obligatory work, or I should only do my obligatory work when he is at school. I mean, for example, I can go to work. It can take hours. I can go to work for 8-10

> hours. No problem at all. But I can't go to the hairdresser's for even an hour. Or I can't go to the movies. Then, I feel incredibly remorseful. I mean, I'm leaving my child for something arbitrary. I feel like I'm being selfish. This feeling still hasn't gone away in the past 3 years. I mean, it's been 3 years since the child started school. It still hasn't gone away. I'm slowly forcing myself. It's not like that. Of course, I should spare time for myself, too. I say to myself that it is actually a good thing for the child to spare time for me. But I still have that feeling. It is very clear. (Derya, 32, parent, private preschool)

Mothers who feel identified with the caregiving responsibility try to cope with the thought of transferring it to someone else. They need a rationale to convince both themselves and society that they can transfer the responsibility. This justification can only be a compulsory job; arbitrary jobs cause a guilty conscience.

The motivation for non-working mothers to send their children to preschool is mostly the belief that the child will do better. They recognize the role of early childhood education in socialization, physical and mental development, and in contributing to academic achievement. Although the home environment may provide safety for children, it might not always be the most beneficial setting for their overall development. Over time, mothers may feel inadequate in meeting their children's needs while managing caregiving responsibilities alone within the context of urban life. The focus group of private school parents addressed this issue as follows:

> Participant 1: After the age of three, they are always looking for friends. They want friends in a different environment, they want to share things with friends because their parents are no longer enough.

> Participant 2: Of course. For example, my daughter wants to play with me. She is three years old now. Well, my priorities have always been the house, food, and this and that. So, I couldn't spare time for the child properly. But when her brother comes, they are enough for each other. They play with each other. So there is no problem when he comes in the evening, but during the day, I see that the child is always in search. And I am harsh with her. Then I feel sad because I can't give her

> anything. But there are some things I have to do, though. Maybe I have to sacrifice a little bit and pay closer attention to her, but I guess it's a bit of personality and character. I can't. I feel a little remorse there, of course. (Focus group, avg. 40, parents, private preschool)

The mother, whose son attends kindergarten but does not send her little girl to school, says she cannot pay enough attention to her. She cites other things she has to do or prioritizes as the reason for this. She also says that she cannot make this sacrifice because she does not have a playful character. Despite the uniqueness of every motherhood, which stems from the fact that every mother, every child, and every relationship is unique, some socially affirmed behaviors or forms of relationships put pressure on women. She may have a different relationship with her child because she is not a game-playing character, but she feels that she should have spent one-on-one "quality" time and play with her child as prescribed by current "good motherhood," and she feels regret about this. Another participant in the focus group suggests Participant 2 send her toddler to preschool as a solution:

> Participant 3: This time, you're pushing it with the psychology that I always have to take care of her. Because your nerves break down, the biggest harm is to yourself. And you do more harm than good to the child. For example, what do you do when time passes? You go to pick her up, but you miss her. She misses you, and you miss her during that time. Why are fathers happier with their children when they come in the evening? They are patient. They eat the honey. The sweetest. The child will go to bed in two hours. But we are together all day, and we are fed up by the evening. We get angry and shout at the smallest thing.
>
> Participant 1: Even though I put them in day care at the age of two and a half, I can't bear it, maybe because they are twin boys. [Normally] I am very calm. I am a very relaxed person, but these kids made me a monster. A monster came out of me. (Focus group, avg. 40, parents, private preschool)

The mother's inability to meet the child's social needs at home, as well as her inability to provide a peaceful environment for the child due to the burden of

caregiving, may be one of the reasons that lead her to institutional care. This may not always be due to a fighting relationship. The home may cease to be a beneficial environment for the child who does not get enough attention, cannot keep himself busy, and is increasingly exposed to screens:

> When I really think about the things she does when she stays at home and compare it to that, I guess, considering that she was always watching TV before that. I mean, I think it was a very good thing for her, and after she started school, her own game-playing increased a lot; I mean, it increased tremendously. So, I didn't think that I was doing something bad for her. (Elif, 29, parent, private preschool)

Elif is a mother who had her second child shortly after her first. While caring for the new baby, she was not spending enough time with her first child and had to increase her screen time to keep her occupied. As a result, she began to see home as a more harmful environment for her child than the school could ever be. Similarly, Yasemin, who has a new baby, sees school as being for the good of her son because she cannot do enough by herself:

> One reason was to keep him away from the 3Ts (TV, tablet, phone). But the first one was definitely his socialization. When I look at my first child, she has a sibling at home, and we can't go out, we can't socialize. I wanted him to have a world of his own with his own peers. Independent from his sibling, independent from us. That's why I started by pushing my conditions to a place like a playgroup, waiting there for 2 hours with the baby, and taking him there. Let him have his own space. Let him be with his peers so that he can socialize. My search for a school was also very sensitive. I looked for a school where there are no tablets, televisions, or phones. (Yasemin, 29, parent, private preschool)

During her search for a kindergarten for her son, she visited many schools and met with the directors. She liked a school with a natural garden on the side of Istanbul, where she did not live, and she had the courage to take her child there. She describes the process of searching for the best school for her son as follows:

> I went there, and when I came out of there, I phoned [my husband] and said, 'I found an incredible school. Here, the child is in touch with the soil, animals, and each other, something that an urban kid will never find, and then two days later, I went to Kağıthane and told him that this was not important. I think the teacher is more important. I found a school with a huge Lego wall, and I made a phone call, and then I realized that the physical conditions were nothing. Forget the Lego wall; let's teach this child the Qur'an. But I had serious concerns when I started this school. I said they would teach this child the Qur'an, but what about other things? What about math? What about English? What about physical sports and music? What about painting? I thought that their teachers might be deficient in the pedagogical sense. And I had serious doubts. (Yasemin, 29, parent, private preschool)

She is not just deciding which of the schools is better; she is in the process of deciding what is actually better for her child. This shows the anxiety of a middle-class mother with financial resources and many options to do what is best. More emotional times, such as the first start of preschool, also increase the intensity of these feelings of anxiety and guilt. School adaptation is a challenging time for many children. Children who spend two to three years with their mothers, especially if they do not have older siblings, do not find it easy to adjust to an institution full of strangers, even if it is full of toys. For mothers, this separation is a second experience of separation and independence after weaning from breastfeeding. This experience has an emotional burden not only on the child but also on the mother. For this reason, this orientation period can be experienced as a time when the reasons for sending the child to school are questioned, motherhood is judged, and feelings of guilt prevail:

> Honestly, our orientation period lasted a month, which is relatively long. It was two weeks regularly. We went an extra two weeks because there was not the slightest sign of separation, and frankly, I decided to take him out of school in the fourth week. It was very difficult for me, too. Because I started to think that I was doing something bad to the child. I'm doing something for myself. And it seemed like it was a very

> bad thing for him, and my parents and my mother-in-law kept saying, "Okay, we'll take care of him. Take him from the school." But now I am very happy. The place where we are waiting is right across from his classroom, and the classroom is on the top floor. So I used to come to the door of her classroom, and sometimes I would go in every time. And leaving him in the classroom like that. After he was convinced that I was in that building, he agreed to stand alone in the classroom. We started very hopeful, but there was such a sharp decline in the process. So I questioned this a little bit, and yes, So I always thought, "Why am I giving him to school? Yes, so that he can gain something. But am I actually giving him to school for myself? Am I giving him to school for him? I mean, who is it a favor for?" (Didem, 31, parent, private preschool)

Didem's reflection reveals how non-compulsory early childhood education emerges as a field where the mother questions who truly gains from it. The cases shared above illustrate mothers' feelings of guilt, both toward their children and society, regarding the decision to send their children to school at an early age, as well as the processes through which they seek to legitimize these decisions.

Mothers' anxiety about being a "good mother" is also shaped by the knowledge they acquire, also through external influences such as experts. The role of experts in teaching good mothering is also emphasized by Hays (1996), who conceptualizes "intensive mothering." The author devotes a chapter of the book to analyzing specific publications produced by experts on this subject. Today, the number of resources on motherhood, parenting, and child development has increased, becoming more accessible and popular in Türkiye. Statements made by experts have spread faster through "social media experts." The fact that a more educated generation, starting from Generation Y, has experienced motherhood has made it more possible for these mothers to carry out this process by using their cultural capital as a resource. In addition, schools can also organize programs to support parents on issues such as parenting. Elif and Didem send their children to the same private kindergarten. They quote the words of an expert mentor who participated in a program organized by the school as follows:

> Didem: The mentor who came to the school said, "Since you have become a mother by choice, you are the owner of these children. So, every day, you have to regain your energy and look at it in a positive way. The child has not chosen to come into the world by themselves." (Didem, 31, parent, private preschool)

> Elif: "Then, have fun," they said. After all, you have chosen a life with children. They didn't mean in a bad way; they meant like you are doing what you want [i.e., parenting]. And they said, "Think that I can be enough for all my children. Never think that I can't take care of both of my children. I am a mother, and I can be enough for all my children. But as I said, you need to gather that energy over and over again." (Elif, 29, parent, private preschool)

While experts in the field of parenting play the role of guiding parents based on scientific data, they are, in fact, constantly reconstructing the assessment of good motherhood. As the statement shows, while supporting the mothers' emotional state, the expert also reminds them of the responsibility of raising a child (and even of the decision to give birth), such as intensive motherhood, and advises them to remember this every day and act accordingly. Middle-class mothers can be more exposed to the knowledge, definitions, and realities produced in the scientific field. This has a significant impact on their daily experiences of motherhood. Furedi (2002) criticized this effect on the grounds that expert pressure even pushes mothers into "paranoid parenting" and emphasized the need to restore their confidence in their own judgments and instincts. The propaganda of "good motherhood" imposed by people who are not really experts but influential on social media also puts pressure on mothers. Halime, the manager of a private school in a lower-middle SES neighborhood, observes this situation in her school parents as follows:

> This time, the comparisons start. They wear themselves out. "That influencer is doing this and that to their child. She does this activity. This is how she spends her day. I can't. My child comes home from school, and I'm tired. I can't spare time for her." This time, mothers go into burnout a lot when they go with this comparison. (Halime, 30, manager, private preschool)

In addition, the trends that mothers follow in pursuing their children's best interests may not always serve the child's well-being. Concerns dominated by superficial performative culture that are not evaluated with education, scientific knowledge, and cultural capital can be unnecessary and even detrimental to children. Serap, a teacher from another private school in the same district, criticizes parents for being filled with misinformation and having false expectations:

> Unfortunately, Instagram, the misinformation that mothers get from Instagram, and the advertisements that show that preschool education is only about art have changed everything. Parents started to expect everything. They want to teach literacy and math, but they don't know that they are taking away the child's right to play. For example, when I do activities, you know there is a rounding technique. You cut old graph paper into small pieces and roll them. I think it is a very good activity that develops muscles. But it makes no sense in the eyes of the parents. For them, it has to be something cool. I am trying to break this down. […] They read something about child development on Instagram and then come back and say that if we treat the child in such and such a way, this will happen. I don't think that things that happen occasionally in family life will suddenly make children depressed out of the blue. I tell them that, too, so don't blame yourself because the mother who approaches the child with this psychology driven by guilt is also very dangerous. The child wraps them around his little finger, and it's too late when they realize what happened. (Serap, 45, teacher, private preschool)

Özge, a teacher working in a public kindergarten who graduated from the best university in the field of preschool teaching, explains that she has observed this child-oriented parent profile based on unreliable information in her public school as well:

> The child is upset about a situation. When he comes home, he tells his mother about it. Parents might say, "My child was upset there; how could you not do something?" Or they may want their children to do whatever they want.

(Me: Even though it is a public school, it can be this much?)

Yes, yes, definitely. Because I think there is a serious change in parents now. I mean, I don't know what the reason is. Of course, families identify themselves with their children a lot, and overprotectiveness has become very common. Everyone thinks they are child development experts because of Instagram. So I have no idea. Why is that? But just to put it in quotes, the know-it-all parent profile is also common in public schools now.

(Me: Like a new generation of parents?)

Definitely, it is even called "helicopter parent". We definitely see traces of this. (Özge, 27, teacher, public preschool)

The public kindergarten where Özge works is an independent public kindergarten where mostly working parents send their children, and which has been made full-time with afternoon activities. As mentioned earlier, the public/private divide among kindergartens does not correspond to a working-class/middle-class divide. Many middle-class families also choose to send their children to a public school where they find the conditions good enough or where they trust the teacher. Therefore, it can be argued that child-centered and anxious middle-class parenting practices are also visible in public preschools without attributing a social class identity to individual people.

Similarly, a paid teacher, Selma, working in another independent public kindergarten, discusses mothers trying to measure their children's achievements by comparing them to other children:

Usually, the parents request more than the curriculum. They are now putting their children in a race. I get feedback such as, "Let my child learn more; give mine a little more attention." [When asking about their kid's performance in the classroom:] "My child is a few months younger than other kids. How is her development? Can she catch up with them? What can we do at home to help her catch up?" They don't ask if my child is developing well; they ask if she can catch up with the others. I think this is also very sad. (Selma, 27, teacher, public preschool)

Putting children into competition over achievement at a time when they are still at a play age is a clear indication of their parents' anxiety about the future. Middle-class mothers try to ensure the best interests of their children in a categorically competitive way (Reay, 1998, p. 162), whether consciously or implicitly. This can be observed when they are looking for a good private school for their own child or trying to secure a spot in a good public school at the expense of another child. This attitude is a result of the competitive structure of the education market. Özyeğin (2005) emphasizes that the increasing privatization of education at all levels is a significant change in modern Turkish society, with lasting effects on class stratification. The fierce competition to get into the best schools requires parents to take a keen interest in their children's academic and extracurricular activities. Parental supervision of education has become the primary task of both housewives and working mothers. All these activities take women out of the home, expand the public sphere in which they fulfill their maternal roles, and enable them to enter into new socialization and competitive relationships with their peers. At this point, Özyeğin emphasizes that these new roles have brought with them new definitions of what it means to be a good and successful mother, while also strengthening women's identity as independent actors in the public sphere (Özyeğin, 2005, p. 70). When motherhood is regarded as a major personal achievement, the pressure to be a good and successful mother intensifies, which can lead to overthinking and heightened stress in the field of education. Yasemin, who mentioned her own diligent school search process above, also criticizes today's mothers for being overanxious and overthinking about their kids at school:

> I think the new generation of mothers expects too much from schools and teachers, which makes them unhappy. They see their children as very special and compare them constantly. For example, my parents think my son is gifted just because he can read and write—but so can many kids his age. This generation of mothers dotes on their kids a lot, perhaps out of not having so much work to do, or having a guilty conscience if they work. Their expectations become extreme, like asking if their child ate the parsley they planted in class or why their child wasn't in a photo. These reactions seem very strange to me. (Yasemin, 29, parent, private preschool)

She relates mothers' excessive attention and obsessive monitoring of their children to their feeling of guilt if they work, or their decreasing responsibility at home, which aligns with Özyeğin's evaluation of middle-class mothers. According to her, changes in cultural norms regarding housewifery and motherhood have altered middle-class women's relationship with the home and domesticity, increasing the importance of women's activities outside the home. These women increasingly devote their labor and time to cleaner areas of home life, most importantly, consumption and children's education (Özyeğin, 2005, p. 154). Even if transferring household chores to paid workers is not the only reason for mothers to be more involved in their children's education, it shows how different fields can influence each other by enabling a more child-centered approach. As a counterexample, an experience shared by a teacher working in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area with an SES score of E can be given. Sümeyye, who works at a 4-6-year-old Qur'an course, states that during home visits to students, they observed the home conditions and were able to connect these to the students' behavior in the classroom. They visited the home of a child whom the teacher described as not receiving sufficient parental attention, failing to meet school expectations, and frequently returning damaged school materials. Upon meeting the uneducated mother, who had four children and no support within the household, Sümeyye realized that rather than providing special attention to her child, the mother was struggling to meet the family's basic needs. Confronted with this structural impossibility, she sympathizes with the mother: "I truly felt for that woman" (Sümeyye, 39, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course). The mother in this case, overwhelmed by economic hardship, has not had the opportunity to acquire the cultural capital required to develop an awareness of the developmental or emotional significance of early childhood. In contrast, mothers with higher living standards have the luxury of experiencing anxiety over whether the level of attention their child receives at home is also being provided at school, which demonstrates classed types of maternal anxieties.

For middle-class mothers with cultural capital, or at least the chance to acquire it, the awareness of child development, care, and education also produces a state of anxiety, which is constantly fed by external factors. In the information age, all kinds of information and recommendations that reach

parents, no matter who produces them and whether they are true or not, when combined with the child-oriented parenting approach, become a significant source of anxiety for them. Mothers, however, are able to navigate this overwhelming flow of information by drawing on their own education, individual circumstances, and habitus. A recent study in Türkiye shows that middle-class mothers are not completely passive recipients of expert advice but have agency in making decisions about their children. They are not confined within the framework of intensive mothering that glorifies self-sacrifice but act according to "a model in which they self-monitor the difference between their well-being and the best interests of their children" (Sadıkoğlu & Erdoğan Coşkun, 2024, p. 14). The new generation of mothers is trying to protect their children's well-being, including mental health, through the forms of communication recommended by experts, physical development, and academic success, while at the same time trying to maintain their own health, which is worn out by this burden. This point marks a key distinction between anxious mothering and intensive mothering. While intensive mothering centers on total self-sacrifice and constant involvement in the child's life, anxious mothering encompasses a simultaneous concern for both the child's well-being and the mother's own mental and emotional needs. Institutional ECEC services also provide a means for mothers to address the second need. Enrolling children in a day care center is not only a necessary solution for working women but also an opportunity for women who do not work full-time and want to take time for themselves. This self-reserving time can be on the grounds of academic studies, as in Gülsüm's case:

> Can I be honest? Taking time for myself was my number one motivation. Yes. [laughs] Yes. Even though I love children, I used to play with children before I had children, and I loved spending time with children, but taking care of your own child is something that requires a lot of time. It takes up all your time. And you have no personal time left. After I came back from America, my son was 2.5 years old. I kept him at home for a year. I said I would spend time with him. We walked around the parks and gardens for a year. But I couldn't keep up that pace any longer. Since he was already 3.5 years old, I thought he was old enough to adapt to school, so I enrolled him in school. I wanted to

> do something myself. My primary motivation was to do something and have some spare time for myself. When he started school, I started my master's degree. (Gülsüm, 29, parent, private preschool)

Middle-class mothers who wish to make time for cultural and art activities within their own habitus can also apply for ECEC services:

> When he started school last year, I had declared my freedom. I was staying at home a lot with children before, so when my son started school, I made a great effort to focus on my calligraphy life, my tafsir life, and I went to shopping centers, grocery stores, and I can say that I completely threw myself into the outside. (Yasemin, 29, parent, private preschool)

Middle-class mothers who perform their anxious mothering while making the decision to send their children to preschool show it not only when feeling guilty but also when defending themselves. Elif and Didem try to comfort themselves by saying that school hours are not too long and they still take enough care of their children:

> When I picked up the child [from school], I asked the teacher, "How are you?" She said, "Well, we have finished for the day." I said, "Yes, we are taking over." She said, "Yes, of course, your job is more difficult; you are doing this job all the time." So, there really is such a thing. My friend was saying, "He goes to school for eight hours. If he sleeps for eight hours, we have another eight hours left at home." (Elif, 29, parent, private preschool)

> It's about a guilty conscience. When I was going to give my first son to school, I always wondered what time it would end. Oh, at 3:30 pm? It's too late. Is he there all day? But actually, we start a new day after 3:30 pm. We do so many things until the evening. We play games, we go to dinner, we fight. So when you look at it like that, no, actually, school is not very long. He goes to school around 9:30-10 am, and actually, the thing is there until 1:30 pm. Then they sleep, they eat something, and we pick them up. And since he sleeps on top of that, he starts with completely new energy and wants to play again. It doesn't require

> remorse at all. I mean, it's very exaggerated to think as if the child ends the day without ever seeing each other. (Didem, 31, parent, private preschool)

Even mothers who send their children to preschool not because they have to but because they recognize their own needs and want to have personal time for themselves, and who have the financial capital to do so, can still come to the point that the well-being of the mother will ensure the well-being of the child. This shows that not ignoring themselves while taking care of their children does not exclude them from anxious mothering.

To conclude, middle-class mothers navigating the context of child-centered modern parenting often find themselves caught in the web of anxious motherhood. This anxiety is shaped by a constellation of factors: 1. Neoliberal individualism places the burden of child care primarily on mothers, framing parenting as a personal responsibility rather than a collective one; 2. The commercialization of care services turns parenting into a consumer-driven project, where parents have to find the best care and education for their children themselves, as it is not unconditionally provided for the early ages by the state; 3. Expanding cultural capital and parental awareness, fueled by expert discourse and social media, prompts mothers to think more critically and extensively about their children's development, environment, and future, thereby intensifying the mental load of motherhood; 4. Social pressure often compels mothers to justify their timing and motivations behind enrolling their children in preschool, generating a sense of social guilt about their choices; 5. Mothers' desire for self-fulfillment creates tension between individual aspirations and societal expectations of selfless parenting, which is a challenging task of balancing their own well-being with that of their children. In brief, as these mothers, possessing a certain level of economic and cultural capital, strive for their children's success and happiness, they often struggle with responsibility, guilt, societal judgments, expert advice, and the overwhelming pressures of social comparisons, which lead them to engage in middle-class parenting practices. With this multi-layered structure,

> mothering can be approached as a Bourdieusian 'field' (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015). Within it, mothers perform their own class

> dispositions and aspirations, in a constant struggle to renegotiate the power relations between themselves, childcare and medical experts, local institutions and global knowledges, which structure the ideas about both children's needs and maternal contributions. (Cheresheva, 2022, p. 86)(Bulgarian context)

As middle-class mothers are among the most important players in the ECEC field, this research intersects with the field of motherhood. This section has examined the state of anxiety mothers experience throughout the process of receiving ECEC services. Importantly, women's higher educational levels and improved social status are closely tied to greater opportunities for outsourcing childcare (Schmidt et al., 2023), and this relationship works in both directions. In this sense, ECEC institutions are critical not only for children's development but also for enabling mothers to cultivate other personal, professional, and social roles and identities as women. This function of empowerment may help reduce anxieties related to their own well-being, even as it generates new anxieties around their children's development and the social judgments attached to their caregiving choices. Yet, because the sector is largely privatized, access to these benefits depends heavily on economic and cultural resources, producing diverse experiences of mothering across class positions.

Moreover, ECEC provision in Türkiye is itself gendered, in that care responsibility is primarily transferred from women to other women. While the work of ECEC services has become a professional domain for female caregivers and educators, it seems "the notion of mothering as women's responsibility is left unchallenged" (Glenn, 1994, p. 7). In cases where service providers are expected to be mothers and to display characteristics associated with motherhood, such as compassion and engaged care, this reinforces gender-based expectations related to emotional labor. The following sections will examine their school and service preferences, the ways they distinguish themselves, and the dilemmas they encounter, in order to shed light on how class is reproduced in the ECEC field through mothers' classed practices.

§ 5.2 Classed Resources, Expectations, and Preferences for ECEC

In the child-rearing mindset of contemporary anxious parenting, mothering in particular, discussed in the previous section, "becoming a parent means getting engaged in a project called child" (Karsten, 2015, p. 568). It signifies a parenting experience that carefully chooses the timing of a child's birth, the way they are born, the type of fabric they will wear, the nutrition they will receive, the toys they will play with, and ultimately, for the early childhood period, the school they will attend, as if designing the whole process of a project. Having such a perspective also requires the possession of certain capital, in other words, a class position. In her seminal book, Lareau (2011) points to this classed difference between the child-rearing styles of working-class and middle-class families. According to her, while the former group "facilitate[s] the accomplishment of natural growth," the latter "adopt[s] strategies of concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011, p. 3). Especially stemming from class-based reasons, the least advantageous families can neither fulfill certain institutionalized education and organized activities for the leisure time of their children, nor choose a special (public or private) school accordingly. Their children grow in a natural way, being left unoriented. On the other hand, middle-class parents strive to provide the best education for their children and intentionally cultivate their lives with care and purpose. In this line, they pay more attention than working-class parents to pedagogical style and ethos (Kampichler et al., 2018).

Lareau's study of the "often invisible but powerful" impact of families' social class on child-rearing styles focused on primary school children (Lareau, 2011, p. 3). However, the structured parenting performance of families can be traced back to the birth of children. Concerted cultivation can also be seen during pregnancy through activities like taking supplements, attending yoga classes, playing music for the baby, or planning the birth (although aiming for a non-surgical birth under the supervision of a doula and psychologist can be called concerted natural growth, explained later) and in early infancy in practices such as paying special attention to books, toys, room design, and sleep schedules according to the child's development. Sending children to an institutional child care and education center is also a process that is not

independent of the social class of the family. The concerns of families as service recipients, alongside the quality and quantity of services provided in the mixed economy of the ECEC field, play a critical role in shaping the care and education children receive. This section explores the ways in which middle-class parents' class position, shaped by the economic, social, and cultural capital they hold, influences their decision-making process when selecting a preschool for their children, as well as their everyday interactions with and expectations of provided services. The discussion proceeds by analyzing parents' resources through the lens of three forms of capital, economic, social, and cultural, which are examined respectively.

The extent to which families benefit from ECEC services, offered by public and private institutions at varying standards in a mixed economy, largely depends on the volume and composition of capital they possess. In terms of economic capital, this is confirmed by studies showing that socioeconomically disadvantaged children attend preschool at significantly lower rates (Eğitim Reformu Girişimi, 2016). These families can afford the relatively cheaper services provided by institutions such as public schools, municipal nurseries, and PRA Qur'an Courses. Low-income families in need of full-time care turn to low-quality private preschools and nurseries when they cannot meet this need from the state or within the family. In other words, they have very limited access to the wide range of services offered by the private sector, if they have any access at all.

In addition to lower participation, the expectations of low-income families from this level of education may also differ from those of middle-class families. Feyza, the director of Şebboy Kindergarten in Göktürk district of Istanbul, which is far from the center and has a socioeconomic status of A, observed the expectations of parents from different socioeconomic groups from the school as follows:

> Parents with higher socio-cultural status tend to have higher expectations for their children's academic skills, often expecting significant improvement. For example, they frequently ask questions like, "Can we increase the English lessons a bit more?" or "Can we adjust this area a bit more?" They are always making additional requests. For mid-level parents, the general attitude we observe is, "I just want my child to be

> happy, and we want to trust the school." That's what I often tell parents during meetings—when you drop your child off here, put your mind at ease. That's my biggest goal: to make sure parents feel at ease. When that happens, most of the expectations of mid-level parents are already met. For parents at lower levels, at the very bottom of this spectrum, I honestly don't even know what they expect from the school. They simply drop their child off and leave. For instance, if there's a school-related need, a message, or a notification, they often don't respond. It requires extra effort to communicate with them. For example, when we see them at the door, we have to repeat things like, "Look, there's this event coming up," or, "We need some materials for an activity." It often has to be said multiple times because they're generally disengaged. They just drop off their child, go to work, and pick them up in the evening. For instance, there was one parent, now in their third year with us, who in the first year said, "Don't let my child nap at noon so that when we get home, they'll sleep right away." Apparently, the child would sleep through the night. Her concern was not us paying special attention to her kid or anything like that. On the other hand, there was another parent who said, "Make sure they nap at noon because otherwise, they'll be tired when they get home. If they sleep, though, I don't get to spend any time with them." So, we have both types of parents. (Feyza, 32, manager, private preschool)

This passage links parents' socioeconomic and cultural status with their expectations for the school. It is to be expected that parents who work longer hours and in more physically exhausting jobs do not have much time for their children, especially on weekdays. They are relatively limited in how much time they can devote to their children's education and development. Moreover, they may not have the futuristic vision to see this interest as an investment, which "the future-oriented" middle-class parents have (Reay, 2010, p. 402). It is also in line with Lareau's narrative of working-class families who have no vision of going beyond meeting children's basic needs, who are not involved in their children's schooling, who are indifferent to extracurricular activities, and who do not seek to spend productive and structured time with them (Lareau, 2011). On the other hand, considering that the relatively low-income families

mentioned in the passage are ultimately private school parents shows the difficulty and inaccuracy of categorically assigning class identities to individuals. Therefore, the focus here is not on a middle-class vs. working-class opposition based on income or occupation but on practices that can be seen as middle-class or working-class practices. Both families are customers for the same service, but the way they are engaged in the very same service differs depending on their different circumstances and habitus. Furthermore, the middle class is not a unified entity but consists of horizontal and vertical components, just as Feyza mentions different attitudes of parents by positioning them accordingly on a vertical scale. Those who possess more economic and cultural capital have concerns that extend beyond merely ensuring a basic standard of living for their children.

Parents from different levels of the middle class cope differently with the economic burden they face when demanding services for their children in preschool education. The sector, dominated by private schools with their long age range and hours of care, may also be unaffordable for some middle-class families. While later sections will discuss ways of coping with these economic constraints, one of them, the use of intergenerational wealth, is appropriate to mention here as a classed economic resource. In Türkiye, where the use of economic capital for the next generation, i.e., the offspring, is widespread, young parents may turn to their families for support. Sevde shares:

> My father is supporting us now. My husband only has a scholarship; I had a scholarship until last year. Thanks to my father and my mother, who said, "No, we will take care of kindergarten, don't worry about it," my husband is a little bit more comfortable now, so if we were in a very tight situation, he would have gotten a job just for this. By the way, my husband is looking for a position in academia, but there are not even openings in his department. So it was a relief to have my parents behind me and supporting me. And this gave my husband the opportunity to focus on his thesis. (Sevde, 33, parent, private preschool)

Sevde and her husband are Ph.D. candidates in their early 30s. The husband left his previous job to focus on his academic studies, relying on a scholarship to support their household. Although they, as an intellectual couple, do not

refrain from cultural expenditures, they do not have difficulties making a living because they do not live at a very high standard. However, when they want to send their daughter to kindergarten to meet her socialization needs and support her development, this is a big expense that they cannot afford with their current income. They also rule out the public school option due to concerns about the quality of education and the imposition of Atatürkist values. As a result, they pay for private child care with the support of their own families, with the luxury of waiting for a position to open up in academia without taking a regular job.

Educated new middle-class couples who do not have high incomes or are unable to save in the current challenging economic situation might maintain a certain level of consumption habits without lowering their standard of living. However, for major expenditure items, they can rely on support from the older generation, who were able to save in their own time with more frugal spending habits. This intergenerational economic support is, in fact, a form of wealth transfer, which has been studied in the literature in the context of homeownership and results in the reproduction of inequality (Helderman & Mulder, 2007; Spilerman, 2000). While preschool education costs are not as high as purchasing property, they are a significant monthly burden on the family budget, especially in middle-class families where only one spouse works or parents are employed in sectors that are not among the highest-paying, such as academia. Families with affluent or upper-middle-class older generations utilize this transferred economic capital as a resource during their preschool education choices. Sevde acknowledges this generational transfer by saying, "Maybe it is class-based to say 'thanks to my father.'" Nevertheless, she says that her husband's pursuit of tenure is a choice. Although it can be a choice not to compromise on his academic career for a higher standard of living, he would have had to give up this dream to meet the preschool education and care needs if they did not have the transferred economic capital. Otherwise, they would have to compromise on the quality of preschool education. Obviously, families' expectations and preferences for ECEC depend primarily on their economic circumstances. However, this may depend not only on household income but also on class-based generational wealth transmission.

Economic resources not only expand the range of available school choices but also increase parental involvement in the school (Cone et al., 1985). The fact that high-income parents have high expectations from the private schools they send their children to is critically mentioned by a parent, Nazlı, as follows:

> I mean, as your income level increases, your demands increase accordingly. For example, we trusted the teacher. We see that the people at the school are good people. We have this advantage: we know the administrator of the school and the owners of the institution. So we know that their intentions are good. Of course, there may be some things that are caused by the teacher. A teacher can sometimes get angry with a child. It is not a big deal. But there is a very child-oriented system at the moment. Actions are taken according to the child's expression. Of course, we listen to our child. We are aware of everything. We try to follow up. We don't want them to experience anything negative. But being so controlled, that is, the parents being too much involved, the parents controlling everything all the time. This seems a bit wrong to me. It doesn't seem positive for the children either. (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool)

Nazlı, who sends one child to kindergarten and another to primary school with a discounted rate at Defne School, a private educational institution where she herself studied on a scholarship, shares her surprise upon encountering other parents. She highlights their high incomes and luxury consumption (such as taking frequent international vacations) and describes them as "spoiled," noting their tendency to make excessive demands on the school and to exaggerate trivial matters. Another parent, Berra, who sends her child to a well-known and high-priced school in the neighborhood, evaluates other parents as "capricious" and criticizes their attitudes as if their child is the only child, and if the teacher has to meet all their needs (Berra, 35, parent, private school).

Sevde and Nazlı attended private schools until they got into public universities. However, they have different backgrounds. While Sevde, as the daughter of a wealthy family with university degrees and involved in trade, went to private schools as a paying student, Nazlı attended private schools on a

scholarship as the child of civil servant parents. When their own children started their education, public kindergartens were not a serious option for either of them. However, Nazlı emphasizes having been on scholarships for most of her educational life and expects her children to do the same when they reach the level of education where scholarships are available. For this reason, as a private school student and later as a parent, she shares the social space of wealthy families, but it does not mean that she shares their habitus as a whole, which explains her criticism of other parents. Even though being in a social environment different in certain points from her own habitus becomes a challenge for Nazlı, she is determined about the school choice she makes for her children, considering its advantages.

One of the criticized premises of the economic perspective, which assumes that the ECEC market will function smoothly like other markets for any other goods and services, is that parents, i.e., customers, have perfect information about the quality and availability of all ECEC institutions and make preferences accordingly (Stahl et al., 2018). However, obtaining knowledge about schools is closely linked to networking, i.e., possession of social capital. Having parent friends with kindergarten experience or preschool teacher acquaintances is a resource that is often consulted when choosing a preschool. For example, Hazal mentions how she utilized her social environment in her search for a kindergarten. After spending 10 years in Germany for her husband's academic studies, Hazal returned to Türkiye and faced the challenge of finding a suitable school for her four-year-old daughter within a short timeframe. With twin babies at home, she was unable to visit day care centers personally. She emphasizes that the experiences shared by acquaintances were more meaningful to her than the promotional statements of school administrators. About her network in Türkiye, she says, "I trust my network here. I realized that. Social networking is already widespread here." She asked everyone about the kindergartens they recommended. And then she eliminated some of the recommended kindergartens because she heard negative things from other people. This is an example of the function of social capital not only in finding "quality" schools but also in avoiding bad ones. Eventually, she chose Nil Kindergarten, a private school not far from home, inspired by the

Waldorf education system, whose quality of education is similar to that of schools in Germany.

In addition to private schools, social capital is also important for finding a good public kindergarten. For lower-middle-class families who have certain quality standards but cannot afford expensive private schools, finding a good teacher in a public school is a preferable option. For example, Gülay, before sending her son to a private preschool, tried the nearby public school because she had a good neighbor who was a teacher there:

> The public school had a profile of lower-income levels. I mean, Syrians, black people, Kocamustafapaşa is a mixed area. But I wanted to send my son there because I knew the teacher. Because I cared about my communication. And she was a really nice lady. Of course, my son didn't learn much there. But he was very happy. He made friends. He played very well. He wanted to go to school every day. [But] it was not a desirable school. Even the kindergarten teacher there said, "You shouldn't send him to this school in first grade." She used such an expression as "don't let your child be wasted here." But as I said, the teacher was a good teacher. (Gülay, 40, parent, private preschool)

Actually, Gülay did not like the physical conditions or the student profile of the public school, but she sent her son there because she wanted a trustworthy and compassionate teacher she could contact at any time. It is also possible to find academically qualified teachers in public kindergartens. Among the teachers I interviewed were those who had graduated from the best universities in the field of preschool teaching and those who preferred to work in the public sector because of the comfortable working standards, and who had passed the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS) without any special effort. However, finding schools where such teachers work requires social capital. Finding good teachers in public schools was a common lower-middle-class strategy, especially at the elementary school level. Based on the information they had, parents would donate money to the school in order to enroll their children in the class of the teacher they wanted. These donations were, in turn, used to meet the school's needs. The parents paid this money, which was not very little, but was equivalent only to a monthly fee of a private school,

and in a sense, created a special class for their children within the same school, separated from the working class. However, this practice was banned for primary schools in 2024, whereas in kindergarten, the option to choose a teacher remains.

In addition to social capital, the cultural capital that parents possess also influences their expectations and preferences for preschool education. Neslihan's experience in finding a preschool to send her children to is an example of utilizing both her social and cultural background. Her network helped her learn about the school:

> It is a school founded by someone I met in the United States. She also has Montessori schools there. I was aware of it. A friend's daughter was going there. I also knew about it through her. (Neslihan, 35, parent, private preschool)

When asked if she would specifically request the Montessori education system, she says that she has knowledge of the system, although she would not specifically seek it out. She had read books about this education system during her child's infancy and appreciated how it emphasized self-care, independent learning, and building self-confidence. The school her child attends is located in a low socioeconomic neighborhood in Ümraniye, yet it stands out with high walls and a large garden that provides a sense of exclusivity. Most of the students come from various neighborhoods, as their parents, "education enthusiasts," with the words of Neslihan, intentionally sought out this Montessori-based institution. Thus, it is a boutique school where children from upper-middle-class families with a certain level of income, education, and care come together, regardless of the location of the school.

On the other hand, Filiz, who teaches at another Montessori school founded by a politically influential figure, notes that some parents enroll their children without a comprehensive understanding of the Montessori philosophy. These parents, drawn primarily by the school's reputation, often belong to affluent yet less-educated backgrounds. Hence, such prestigious schools, with fees significantly higher than average, can also be preferred by those with substantial economic capital but lacking in cultural capital. Filiz mentions that

the Montessori education system needs to be supported at home, but notes that children from affluent families often struggle to adapt to it:

> Here, the child does their own tasks, but at home, household helpers often assist them. The child is used to being served at home; they do everything themselves here, but when that doesn't continue at home, of course, the child forgets these habits. As a result, we think this might be why the habits don't fully stick. (Filiz, 32, teacher, private preschool)

Here, Filiz criticizes parents who provide their children with an environment of economic abundance and have them cared for by nannies, yet lack awareness regarding their pedagogical development. Another example of the situation in which high income is combined with low cultural capital can be found in Berra's experience. In order to keep up with other families who organized birthday celebrations in external venues such as restaurants, she decided to host a birthday party for her son at home. This gave her the opportunity to observe the parents more closely. When the guests noticed the two rows of bookshelves in her living room, which, in Berra's social circle, represented only a modest number of books, they expressed surprise at how many books she owned. This reaction, in turn, was surprising for Berra and provides insight into the cultural level of the other parents (Berra, 35, parent, private preschool).

This experience highlights cultural capital, rather than economic capital, as the most important factor in middle-class parents' anxious attitudes about their children's development and future and their pursuit of "concerted cultivation," in Lareau's words, even if it requires a budget to provide it.

In their categorization of parents' school choices, Kampichler et al. (2018) observe two types of approaches under the "concerted cultivation" child-rearing style: pedagogical approach-centered and child-centered. The pedagogical approach-based group includes middle-class mothers who pay attention to the type of education offered by the school when choosing a kindergarten, looking for an educational model that will contribute to their social-physical development or academic success, as the parent in Neslihan's daughter's school. The most common educational methods encountered during data collection were Montessori, Waldorf, and Forest School. To briefly mention, founded by Maria

Montessori in Italy in 1907, the Montessori approach promotes independence, self-care, and hands-on learning through a child-centered environment. It allows children to learn at their own pace using specially designed materials and activities (Lillard, 2005). Whereas the Waldorf approach, established by Rudolf Steiner in Germany in 1919, integrates creativity, imagination, and holistic development with a focus on nurturing the child's body, mind, and spirit using artistic expression, storytelling, and rhythmic routines. Until the age of seven, academic education is not provided, and emotional and social development is prioritized (Fenner, 2020). Lastly, the Forest School, developed by Ella Flautau in Denmark in the 1950s, approach encourages exploration, problem-solving, and resilience, using natural outdoor environments as the primary setting (Knight, 2013).

These are "decontextualized" education models (Urban et al., 2019) borrowed from these countries of origin but now spreading across the world. Particularly, middle-class families whose habitus enables them to have knowledge about education models through research or social networks prefer these education models if they can afford their relatively higher fees or obtain special scholarships or discounts, which shows their concern about finding the best education for their children. An assessment of this pursuit as extreme in a different country context illustrates the visibility of this concern, as Hazal shares the reactions of her friends in Germany when she mentioned considering a Waldorf school for her child:

> In Germany, they make fun of Waldorf. If you say at the university in Germany that you come from a Waldorf school, they say, "Why don't you say your name while dancing?" Waldorf children are definitely treated as mama's boys. You know, his mother was very fond of him and sent him to Waldorf. My friends in Germany teased me, "Are you really going to send them to Waldorf?" I think it's really different for the two countries. In Germany, when you send them to a classical kindergarten, they are good enough. I mean, you search again, yes, you can find a good one, but you don't need Waldorf there anyway. The mainstream has already been fed very seriously by the alternative education movement. All those alternatives have almost become

> mainstream. Waldorf is a little bit more at such a point. Here, the situation is quite different. (Hazal, 32, parent, private preschool)

In Türkiye, middle-class and upper-middle-class families, without this dismissive attitude yet, can choose schools that offer services according to these models of education. Some schools also employ certified teachers in some of their classrooms, for example, Montessori classes, even if they are not certified for the whole school.

Even if they are not necessarily seeking a branded education model or cannot afford it, middle-class parents can still be concerned about their children's development and academic progress starting from early childhood as part of concerted cultivation. Halime, the director of a kindergarten established by her father in a district with a socioeconomic status (SES) score of C, serves families in her local community. She describes the educational demands of the mothers, who are predominantly university graduates or at least high school graduates, with half being employed, as follows:

> So basically, they're saying they want their child to be ready for school, right? Like, there's some sort of early education they need beforehand, and they're aware of that. But, to be honest, they don't really know the exact term for it. They don't say 'muscle development,' but there are more people who bring kids, saying, "I want them to be ready for primary school; I want them to get this education." Especially in the past few years, I've noticed that with Instagram and social media, parents are getting more informed. They know more about child development, they know more about education, and they're picking up the terminology better. There's definitely more awareness compared to before (Halime, 30, manager, private preschool)

Mothers who are more knowledgeable about early childhood physical and cognitive growth, such as brain development, motor skills, and fine motor abilities, place significant importance on the activities provided by schools when deciding to enroll in preschool and choosing the school. For example, Nuray, with an awareness of her daughter's developmental needs, believes that it is now necessary for her to attend school since she cannot fully meet these needs at home:

> Playing games with his peers. That was my first aim for her to go to school. I wanted her to learn group discipline, to gain the ability to do something together. Then there's stuff like cutting paper for motor development, especially fine motor skills. At home, you can only do it to a certain extent, but at school, they do it in a more disciplined way. Secondly, there is Qur'an education at the school I chose. I wanted that for their brain development because memorizing stuff at this age helps their brain grow faster. And I think it'll help their academic career in the long run. That's why I picked this school: to support their brain development. (Nuray, 31, parent, public preschool)

What stands out in this perspective is her rationale that she even sees early Qur'an memorizing as a way to support her child's brain development.

The second approach under concerted cultivation is observed as the child-centered approach by Kampicler et al. (2018). Anxious mothers who are concerned about their children's well-being and, at the same time, are able to analyze their individual needs and personalities in-depth, rely on these assessments in their decisions about schooling and school choice. Melek's case exemplifies parents' awareness of their child's development. Melek's son was a "COVID child." When he was three years old, they realized he was having some developmental difficulties. He had only a few words. He could not jump. He had problems with motor movements. They were worried, so they immediately went to the doctor. They learned that there was no physical problem. Then, they started ergotherapy on a recommendation. When they completed three months of ergotherapy, the developmental psychologist told them:

> "You will think of this as a prescription. You need to start school. This is a child who has no siblings. A child left alone in the pandemic. You live in a private house. There are no children around him. You have very little contact. Social isolation is not good for this child. And this child needs to be enrolled in school". And in the midst of that pandemic, we enrolled him in a school with masks, being scared. But it helped him a lot. I mean, suddenly, the child started to thrive. (Melek, 34, parent, private preschool)

This example also illustrates parents' reliance on experts associated with intensive motherhood (Furedi, 2002; Hays, 1996) in making an important parental decision, albeit not through the method of childrearing. In addition to being aware of their children's development, middle-class parents make decisions about ECEC based on a detailed analysis of their children's personalities. For instance, Meltem paid attention to the personal characteristics of her two children of different genders with an age difference of two and a half years when looking for a kindergarten. She describes her daughter as a strong auditory learner, open to academic knowledge, happy with desk activities, and in need of a very kind and soft-spoken teacher. She finds a school and a teacher for her that meets these needs. As for her son, she describes him as a natural child, open to learning through discovery, and socially nervous. For this reason, he starts Waldorf school, but at the same time, he is a fastidious child and has difficulties with touching the soil and getting dirty. As a result, he goes to a boutique school with more structured nature activities, also where he can get to know everyone and overcome his social shyness.

In these ways, when parents are looking for a good school for their children, they are trying to nurture their individual characteristics and bring out their potential (Kampichler et al., 2018). Similarly, Gülay points out that every child has a point that needs to be supported. And she regards it "like gold dust" to find a teacher who can see this and act on it. These parents define quality education and care as more than just meeting a certain standard but as recognizing the uniqueness of each child. This means that their own children can find their place in the school environment as individuals with special needs, abilities, and emotions. They, therefore, expect this observation skill and attention from teachers. For example, Didem mentions the need for a teacher who is able to recognize and communicate with each child individually, not just with dominant children. She appreciates detailed feedback about each child at parent-teacher conferences, which indicates the teacher's attentiveness. Elif also draws attention to the individual emotional state of children, saying that even when disciplining, "the teacher should do so in a way that does not make any child feel bad, inadequate, incomplete or worthless in any way." Since the education period here is early childhood, middle-class families care more about their children's healthy emotional state than their academic

achievement. Investing in their children in sports, music, and arts through branch courses at school or out-of-school courses is a common concern among middle-class families and a practice that is also fulfilled in early childhood (Vincent & Ball, 2006). However, in the age of psychology, one of the most important focal points of new mothers, especially those who face their own problems, their own childhoods, and the parenting performance of their own mothers, has been the emotional and mental well-being of their children. Elif, who sends their children to a private Waldorf kindergarten, says that the high cost of this level of education is worth it:

> Considering that this is the period that will affect the child's life the most. The expenditures I make in this period are actually much more meaningful. If the period up to the age of 7 was really good, and if I was able to establish that connection, then it would be easier to make progress. But if this period is problematic, you cannot compensate for it with special education as much as you want. (Elif, 29, parent, private preschool)

Nazlı, who criticizes taking children from course to course by saying, "I don't like to make children run like racehorses," talks about the investment they make in the child's psychology in the early period.

> We spend the most money on therapy. Because the period in which we can develop a child's character is limited. After that, the child will use the available balance (*mevcut bakiye*) for life. Therefore, we try to smooth out the aspects of children with therapy support in order to prepare them for life. (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool)

Melek shares the following experience that illustrates parents' expectations from preschools regarding their children's psychological well-being:

> I witnessed an incident when I first went to the school to meet them, and the way the school psychologist dealt with the incident made me shake hands, and say, "Okay, I feel satisfied." While I was there, a child walked into the principal's office. We were sitting there, and he said to me, "Are you going to bring your child here? Do you know how much I miss my mother?" Imagine I'm going to enroll my child in school.

> I'm not sure yet. Actually, run away, right? And then the kid said, "My stomach hurts." I'm a new customer there to enroll. They didn't take care of me. They said, "We're sorry. Yes, we had an appointment with you, but we have a situation right now. We will keep you waiting." I sat there waiting. First, the psychologist talked to the child. Then, his mother was informed. His mother came, and after seeing his mother, the child started crying on the way to class. And gasping for breath. Shouting, "I don't want it, I don't want it." The teacher also did a mindfulness exercise and a breathing exercise. A child-adapted version of the mindfulness exercise as we know it. I just heard, "Now we breathe like this. Now we are here. Our feet are here, our hands are here, our head is here." By doing that sensory thing. And then the child calmed down. He went into the classroom. And I was not interviewed during this process. I met with the principal with a delay of about an hour. And then I said, you know, a parent came, a customer came. But they prioritized their own children, a child in need, and I think they managed the process very well. I registered that day. (Melek, 34, parent, private preschool)

The experience narrated by Melek highlights the importance that "conscious" or knowledgeable middle-class families place on the psychological well-being of children when selecting schools, demonstrating how professional techniques, such as mindfulness exercises, can leave a lasting impression on these parents. The recent phenomenon of the psychologization of society, or, in other words, the popularization of psychology, has also had an impact on this trend. The therapeutic process that started in the 1970s has led to an increase in discourses and practices on psychological problems and treatment methods with the influence of neoliberal subjectification (Rose, 1998; Tändler, 2016, as cited in Sieben, 2024). Psychologization, also referred to as "psycho-boom," has been stated in conjunction with the habitus that exists within and reproduces social inequalities. Thus, it is not independent of social class positions and practices. And psychologized lifeworlds are mostly attributed to the upper middle class (Illous, 2009; Tändler, 2016, as cited in Sieben, 2024). In Türkiye, following Western societies, although with a different historical trajectory, the population, mostly in the major cities, has begun to become psychologized

(Gulerce, 2006). This psychological emphasis is likely to resonate with educated families who are actively engaged with relevant literature or have greater access to sources of information. As a result, new parents, in particular, feel an increasing responsibility to prioritize the psychological well-being of their children, adding a layer of pressure to their anxious parenting and affecting school choices.

Families driven by the psychological well-being movement may contradict the heavily scheduled child-rearing style of concerted cultivation, at least during early childhood, and begin to value free play. In fact, the free-play perspective can be seen as more closely aligned with working-class values that are content to simply provide a safe environment rather than the developmental rhetoric of "constant stimulation" that resonates with middle-class parents (Stefansen & Skogen, 2010, p. 595). However, the attitude of these middle-class parents against children constantly spending structured time does not mean that they are neglecting them completely and surrendering them to "natural growth," as the working-class families' narrative (Lareau, 2011). They still aim to shape children's development in a good way on the basis that children's work is play, and children's need for free play should be met in this early period. From this perspective, "Lareau's dual logics of childrearing [can be] too flat to capture the subtle (discursive) nuanced meanings of accomplishment of natural growth" in certain contexts, according to Kampichler et al. (2018, p. 25). They mention those middle-class parents who deliberately choose and admit certain pedagogical approaches aiming to preserve the "natural" being of children and label this style as "concerted natural growth." For example, Hazal mentions that when she returned from Germany to Türkiye and was searching for a school for her daughter, she was looking for something very "simple" but found it only at a high-priced Waldorf school:

> There were a few things that really mattered to me. Like what? Well, actually, something pretty simple. I just wanted my kid to be able to play with whoever they wanted, with the toys they liked, and I ended up sending them to [Waldorf school]. I really feel like we want something very simple. I talked it over with my spouse, too, and I guess it comes from my experience in Germany. Over there, preschools usually have free playtime. Certain toys are always in certain places in the

> classrooms; yes, there is a routine. But usually, the children play freely. I really liked that. That's why I was looking for that a little bit here, too. I mean, I'd rather they not push the kid to do stuff—like don't hand them a workbook, you know. Walking into a preschool and seeing those workbooks and all that kinda irritated me. (Hazal, 32, parent, private preschool)

Although free play does not require extensive materials or significant effort and intervention from teachers, it is sometimes not preferred in certain schools in order to facilitate the management of children or to make the educational content appear rich. Even educational methods like Montessori, which center on the child, emphasize self-care and self-sufficiency, and allow children to select activity stations according to their preferences, are criticized by parents for not providing sufficient opportunities for free play. Neslihan complains that while her school is equipped with Montessori materials, it lacks toys for pretend play, such as dolls and playhouses:

> I feel like there's something missing—there aren't enough toys that encourage pretend play, like playing house. They do have a doll, but it's mainly used for washing exercises. I mean, they wash the doll, but there's no material to actually play with the doll because they don't really see it as a toy, you know? There is no such toy. [...] I mean, yeah, Montessori is great and all, but it can get pretty strict. It's not really a philosophy that gives a lot of space for play. I wish an environment that encouraged pretend play more—something closer to Waldorf, with dolls and toys so kids could actually play house. (Neslihan, 35, parent, private preschool)

Similarly, Derya criticizes the rigid implementation of this specific educational method without considering parents' preferences:

> They follow the Montessori philosophy, but sometimes, they're so strict about it that they end up sacrificing the kids' enjoyment and free play. I wish that would change. I also wish parents had more of a voice in the education process. Sometimes, if we say, 'Let's do it like this,' they'll ignore it and say, 'No, we can't because that's the way it is in

> Montessori.' But I feel like Montessori should serve us, not the other way around. [...] They work incredibly academically in Montessori, and it's all very structured. That's why, at home, I try not to do anything too structured; I mean, I strive not to push teaching on my kid at home. I just let them hang out, play however they like, and have some free time. I think sometimes the academic side can be overdone at school, so I try to balance that out at home. (Derya, 32, parent, private preschool)

Derya, as an academic herself trained in early childhood education and psychological counseling, mentions deliberately creating a free-play environment at home, exemplifying a concerned middle-class mother's practice of "concerted natural growth," considering the intention and underlying rationale behind it. Unlike working-class parents, who often leave children to unstructured routines due to limited time, resources, or institutional knowledge, this mother consciously implements a less structured environment to counterbalance the academically intensive preschool model her child attends, grounded in her cultural capital and pedagogical orientation.

This section has demonstrated how families' engagement with ECEC is deeply shaped by the forms of capital they hold, economic, social, and cultural, each contributing to distinct patterns of access, expectation, and practice. Socioeconomically advantaged families benefit more from non-compulsory early childhood education and care services, which is also related to the reliance of these services on the private sector. In both public and private schools, social capital plays an important role in finding good and affordable services through network connections. However, the most influential factor among these is the cultural capital families possess. It is through this capital that parents develop an understanding of the necessity and nature of early childhood education and make their choices accordingly. The next section will examine how this form of capital shapes parents' preferences, tastes, and dislikes, and how they produce distinction through these orientations.

§ 5.3 Distinction through Judgements and Discourse on ECEC

The provision and receipt of early childhood education and care services is a process in which classed preferences and expectations take center stage, as mentioned in the previous part. A sociological classification among people "leads to the common root of the classifiable practices which agents produce and of the classificatory judgments they make of other agents' practices and their own" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 164). In other words, analyzing class solely through the lens of observable behaviors would provide an incomplete picture. Manifested preferences and practices may not accurately represent class identities. For instance, families who enroll their children in the same private school might do so under vastly different circumstances and with differing motivations, even if converging reasons and concerns provide classed patterns. Examining a practice without digging into its roots would mean looking at an event from only one dimension, whereas social phenomena are always multidimensional.

One of these dimensions is "classificatory judgments," as mentioned above, i.e., "taste," in the words of Bourdieu (1984). Taste refers to socially conditioned preferences and judgments that are deeply tied to an individual's habitus, economic capital, and, more importantly, the cultural capital they possess. Bourdieu particularly examines taste in the context of branches of art such as music, literature, and painting, and through the perception of aesthetics, arguing that what people appreciate as "beautiful" or "valuable" reflects their social conditioning. Different social classes have different zones of taste, ranging from *legitimate* taste, *middle-brow* taste, and *popular* taste, ordered in descending order of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 8). Those who have the capacity to recognize the "aesthetic" distinguish themselves from others who have not, while preferring any goods or services in everyday life. Choosing a nursery for their children is one of these processes of distinction. This part reveals the ways in which parents distinguish themselves while receiving ECEC services, first by differentiating themselves from public schools, and then by making distinctions among private institutions, drawing on their preferences, judgments, and perceptions, which are shaped by their habitus.

Initially, public schools, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, are often burdened with a negative reputation. While this perception is partially rooted in lived experiences, it has also evolved into a stigma perpetuated by repeatedly transmitted judgments. The quality of services provided by public schools is one of the conditions structuring the ECEC field, but so are the judgments and stigmatized evaluations that people reproduce about it. When parents talk about public schools, both negatively and positively, this stigma is evident. Emine, for example, when talking about the unsatisfactory conditions they had to endure at the 4-6-year-old Qur'an course under PRA she chose for her child, says that "after all, it is a state-affiliated institution." And she adds, expressing frustration about not being able to file a complaint about the situation for this reason. This means that, in addition to having low expectations from a state institution, there is also no hope that it can be improved.

When parents encounter a public school service that exceeds their expectations, they immediately mention that they find it good despite it being a public institution. Filiz mentions that for the middle school education of her own children, she can choose public schools in line with their own worldview, which she considers to be of good quality, as follows:

> Now, there are these really great Imam Hatip schools—those "Project Imam Hatip" ones. Alhamdulillah, they're public, but the teachers are excellent. Public, but look how good they are. Usually, it's otherwise. Public, but actually, it's not like that. Some of them have facilities that feel like private schools, Alhamdulillah. [Laughing] I kind of laugh that I keep saying "public, but …" (Filiz, 32, teacher, private preschool)

She herself realizes her emphasis on the negative perception of public schools. In a reverse case to Filiz's, Hülya, a teacher in a public kindergarten, mentions that she has never thought of sending her kids to a public elementary school:

> I already have a prejudice against public schools, and unfortunately, my concerns are never proven wrong. Especially in elementary school, so many of my friends' kids go, and from what they experience, it's just so crowded, there's no one-on-one attention. The way they teach, the way they deliver lessons—it's all very old, classical methods. That's why

> I was always leaning toward private school anyway. (Hülya, 35, teacher, public preschool)

She admits that her judgment is biased, but she bases it on the experience of her close circle. Nevertheless, she sees private school as the only alternative for her own children without thinking that she can find a good public option, even if she herself works in a public school. While these shares are about public schools at later levels of education, Meral provides another example on the preschool level. She is a parent at an independent public preschool in a district with a socioeconomic score of B and found the school's conditions quite favorable. She explains how this experience contradicts the image she previously held of public schools, which is like:

> It'd be way more plain, you know? I mean, all those things like animals, forests, nature projects, super-involved teachers—I don't think any of that would exist. When I think of a public school, I mean a real public school; I imagine, for some reason, wooden desks, you're just sitting in class, the teacher explains stuff, and you're just listening. It all seems so plain. (Meral, 32, parent, public preschool)

She differentiates the school that her daughter attends, which has more advantageous conditions, from other "real" public schools, while explaining that it is too good to be a real public school. Positive experiences with public schools typically do not alter the prevailing perception of them as a whole; instead, they are seen as exceptions to the rule. Therefore, differentiation from public schools starts even at the level of image, and this reproduces stigma.

Middle-income families struggling with the rising costs of private education find themselves in a position where they constantly make comparisons between public and private schools and among private schools of different quality, unlike more affluent families, who remain isolated from such decisions due to their privileged access to elite institutions. This process of comparison is not simply financial; rather, it involves a constant performance of distinction in the Bourdieusian sense. As these families adjust their budgets and weigh their options, their decision-making is influenced by concerns shaped by their cultural capital, addressing factors such as physical facilities, quality of education, peer environment, and pedagogical approaches. Even if

they are not in a secure economic position, their embedded class dispositions and social aspirations push them to seek differentiation from other groups. Looking at their in-between spaces, where families negotiate access to education through both economic constraints and class-based concerns, is meaningful for understanding how the distinction is constantly rearticulated through the symbolic power of cultural capital and social positioning.

Sevde's in-between position is an example of ambivalent middle-class practice. As a family that does not have the income to easily afford a private school, she expresses that their ideal would be a free or low-fee public school, adding that a public school can only be found "with a lot of research, in a very decent neighborhood, and with a recommendation." Otherwise, she does not have the "courage" to enroll her child in a public kindergarten. Similarly, Gülay, who sent her son to a public school for a year because she found a good teacher, uses the same wording when expressing other complaints about the school: "Under normal circumstances, I would not have the courage to send him to such a place" (Gülay, 40, parent, private preschool). Families tend to be more confident in trying public schools located in socioeconomically advantaged districts that they perceive as "decent." Sevde shares the experience of one of her acquaintances:

> The other day, we were sitting with a friend—she's going to be an assistant professor at our university. Her child just started school this year. They live in Kozyatağı, and she said that because of that, she enrolled her child in a public school. I mean, it's already a decent neighborhood… Like for example, I wouldn't call Kartal a decent place. I mean, where we live is kind of decent, but there are some really bad areas in Kartal. But when it comes to Kozyatağı, we generally see it as an average, decent place—like, it's at a certain level. But she said, "By the second day, we took our child out and put them in a private school." She was like, "It was just that bad." (Sevde, 33, parent, private preschool)

In fact, finding a "good enough" public school, and in some cases turning a public school into a "private school-like space" (Özdemir, 2018), is a strategy of such families who are economically limited but culturally demanding.

While this entrapment of the middle class will be discussed in the next section, the above quote constitutes an example where social distinction dominates this strategy. For families with particular tastes shaped by their cultural capital, it is important that the appearance of the school and the materials used in it are in line with their social status. Even if they do not explicitly express this in terms of "appropriateness," their discourse reveals ways of differentiating themselves. For example, Hazal, who previously lived in Germany, expresses dissatisfaction with the aesthetic quality of school buildings, finding them unappealing to her taste:

> We don't like schools here. I mean, we keep questioning why we don't like them. Even the way they look doesn't sit right with us. Nothing about them feels good, honestly. We even got to the point of saying, "I'm not sending my kid to this ugly building." And it's not like we're those kinds of people, but still… Like, "Is this what my kid has to see every day?" (Hazal, 32, parent, private preschool)

While she does not wish to appear elitist in voicing her concerns about aesthetics, she finds it challenging to accept and adapt to an environment she perceives as visually "ugly," and she relates this feeling to her experiences abroad:

> I was in shock—I had totally forgotten [public schools in Türkiye]. I mean, after eight years in Germany, it kind of hit me. Because I had seen really good kindergartens there, so… I don't know, it just feels weird. If I didn't have that experience, it wouldn't have bothered me at all. But now, unfortunately… Having that kind of exposure really makes you constantly search for a certain level of quality. And when you don't find it, you feel like you're always doing something wrong or missing something. It's tough—these feelings are really hard to deal with. (Hazal, 32, parent, private preschool)

This example illustrates that an individual's taste in a particular subject is not solely confined to the habitus formed during childhood. Although Hazal was educated in a public school in her early years, her later life experiences, educational background, and social environment contributed to the development

of a habitus that allowed for the adoption of new tastes and preferences. She now criticizes a school she visited, where she actually liked their garden and appreciated their having chickens, because of its color: "a purple school—such a classic kindergarten," comparing it to the other school she found "cool."

Beyond the physical structure of the building, the materials used and the design of the classrooms are also assessed from an aesthetic perspective. Classrooms featuring vibrant colors, plastic toys, and chairs are generally viewed unfavorably by parents with a particular cultural sensibility. The preference for wooden materials over plastic reflects a distinction in aesthetic taste rather than a consideration of the functional efficiency of these objects. The discourse on the serene atmosphere nourished by wooden elements, pastel colors, selected activities, and educational approach is particularly prominent in the narratives shared by the parents of boutique kindergartens. Hazal praises the daily routine and calmness at the Waldorf school where she sends her daughter:

> When I entered, it enraptured me … Everything is super slow, and there's a strict routine. Like, on a certain day, they always go to the vegetable garden. Another day, they always bake bread. There's a fixed day for the music class and another for the art class. They call their painting technique "wet-on-wet" for some reason. Every day has something to do, and it goes on and on. On garden day, for example, they collect leaves and paint the next day with the color of the leaves and nature. In autumn, they painted using only yellow and red colors. It's a little bit like that, to slow down life, you know? It's a little bit like thinking about what colors nature has given us this month. The teachers also speak very slowly. There is a general slowness, a general, you know, let's feel the moment, such an atmosphere. It was very good for me and my daughter. When I pick up my daughter, I can feel that calmness in her. That's a very nice thing. I think they also make more creative games. By the way, they also weave carpets. (Hazal, 32, parent, private preschool)

This quotation highlights Hazal's appreciation for the structured yet unhurried rhythm of daily life at their Waldorf-inspired school, which she finds

emotionally calming and pedagogically enriching. She values the slow pace, nature-based activities, sensory art practices like "wet-on-wet" painting, and the overall tranquil atmosphere that she believes positively affects her daughter's well-being and creativity. This sense of tranquility is one of the most frequently mentioned factors that lead parents to prefer certain schools over other private institutions. Neslihan, a Montessori school parent, similarly describes how she was impressed by the tranquil atmosphere of her chosen school. She first visited all the kindergartens near her home, but "ran away" from all of them. The colorful classrooms, cartoon characters, and children doing activities together all the time were too emotionally exhausting for her. When she went to meet with a Montessori school a half-hour drive from her home, she "loved the calmness, the tranquility, the individualized focus of the children and the way they did things." So she decided to take her daughter to that school, even if it took an hour every day. She emphasizes that all the materials used in the school are made of wood and natural materials, that the founder brought them from America or had carpenters here to make them. Similarly, Meltem compliments the use of wood in school: "There are no plastic toys. Everything is wooden. By the way, there are not many toys. Since it is more nature-based, they keep toys very limited anyway" (Meltem, 34, parent, private preschool)

These narratives show how parents choose schools according to their particular tastes and how they differentiate their choices not only from public schools but also from ordinary institutions, among private ones. A parent without such a particular vision might perceive the presence of colorful plastic chairs, a variety of toys, and a lively atmosphere as positive attributes. However, parents with a more distinctive taste differentiate themselves by emphasizing natural elements, tranquility, and a slower-paced environment.

It is not only the physical conditions or the quality of education that these families do not find good enough in the schools they dislike. What they consider at least as important is the environment their children will be exposed to, especially in public schools. In other words, it is the families of other children that they want to differentiate themselves from, i.e., habituses not like their own. In Nazlı's case, they initially enrolled their son in a public school

for a period of time. However, due to his difficulty in adapting to the social environment, they later decided to transfer him to a private school:

> There's definitely a social environment issue in public schools—the lack of a balance. I mean, kids can experience bullying; they might not be able to protect themselves. When there's a huge gap in financial lifestyles, children can struggle to find their place. So, public schools come with their own set of challenges. When I sent my son to a public school, I faced this issue, too. He found himself in an environment with so many differences—cultural differences and a lot of chaos. And he completely shut down. My oldest son is very sensitive and very emotional. If you approach him gently, he opens up. But there, he shut himself off from learning, from enjoying school. He got lost in that chaos. (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool)

Nazlı expresses how much her son liked his new school when he later started a private school, describing it as "like a hotel," which exemplifies the transfer of taste in a way. While acknowledging the challenge of an impending 65% increase in new school tuition, they emphasize the positive aspect of ensuring that their child grows up in a well-rounded environment in that school. She expresses this by saying, "Once you enroll your child in a private school, you are shaping the environment they grow up in, determining their friends. You tell yourself it's crucial for their life." Thus, the choice of kindergarten also shapes the child's habitus. With the privileged social circle they provide for their children, families transfer their cultural capital and aesthetic sensibilities to the next generation, making a strategic investment in their future.

Distinctive service is not only shaped by parental demand, but providers market their facilities according to particular tastes; as Bourdieu claims, "For the dominant class, the relationship between supply and demand takes the form of a pre-established harmony" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 229). Within this harmony, schools are diversified according to the economic, social, and cultural capital they require. Schools that follow a specific method of education, in particular, differentiate themselves from mainstream education or schools with a "popular aesthetic" in the Bourdieusian sense (1984, p. 32). Funda's

narrative about the school where she works as a manager shows how providers of ECEC services also consolidate the distinction in this field.

Funda's school, Kehribar Kindergarten, occupies a unique position within the ECEC landscape, distinguishing itself from conventional market-driven institutions. As an association-affiliated cooperative school founded by volunteer educators, parents, and academics, it operates as a non-profit service provider that prioritizes its foundational values over profit motives, as Funda emphasizes. Kehribar school implements an educational model structured around four core pillars: ecological sustainability, alternative education, democratic governance, and a new financing system. These principles are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, setting the institution apart from mainstream early childhood education providers. Financial sustainability is achieved through parental contributions while ensuring fair labor conditions for staff and maintaining a balanced, non-profit operational model. Funda claims that this approach differentiates the school from other customer-oriented schools and enables a child-centered education model. The cooperative model fosters a democratic decision-making process in which children also participate in certain matters. Additionally, the school embraces an ecological perspective, emphasizing environmental integration.

Located in a district with an SES score of A+, Kehribar school primarily serves children from upper-middle-income, secular families. Although Funda broadly defines these families as (non-upper) middle class since most of them do not have the income to "pay school fees, travel abroad and own a house at the same time," the school is affordable only for relatively affluent families within the private school tuition spectrum (comparing the fees in 2023, it was declared as 10,000 TL per month at this school while it was 3,000 TL at another private school in a district with B SES score). Fundamentally, the organization overseeing the school advocates on its website for quality education to be universally accessible and publicly provided for all children. Aligned with its rights-based approach, the school designates scholarship quotas to support students from diverse economic backgrounds. However, ultimately, the socioeconomic demographic it serves remains limited.

The previous section mentioned how family networks, i.e., social capital, play a role in finding a good school. Further, experiencing early childhood

education within a particular community fosters connections among families with shared values while often creating distinctions between different habitus groups. This dynamic has been influential in Kehribar Kindergarten from its inception, as it was founded within a specific social network. In addition, the democratic decision-making mechanisms they implemented facilitated the integration of new parents into this connected community. Similar parent-engagement events aimed at fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening ties with the school have also been observed in other private institutions, such as Cansu's Waldorf-style Toprak Kindergarten. On the Instagram page of Funda's school, a parent comments as follows: "We had a year that was as privileged and instructive for the parents as it was privileged for the children. We all felt the value of making decisions together." This illustrates how the school offers a "privileged" experience, which was embedded even in its foundation in this case, and continues to be consolidated over time.

Beyond economic and social capital, cultural capital plays a defining role in middle-class parenting practices, encompassing factors such as educational attainment, awareness of early childhood development, and engagement with contemporary parenting approaches. Institutions that implement specialized early childhood education models primarily cater to families possessing this form of capital. The discourse employed within these educational models, as well as in daily practices, reflects a perspective that deviates from mainstream approaches. As a distinct subfield within the broader education system, early childhood education and care has developed its own specialized terminology, used by policymakers and educators to assess educational quality, define activities for children aged 0-6, and articulate developmental goals. However, beyond this standardized terminology, the unique linguistic framework observed in these specialized institutions serves as a marker of differentiation within the broader ECEC experience, reinforcing the distinction between mainstream and alternative educational practices.

The commonly used terminology in early childhood education and care originates from various sources, including the Ministry of National Education's curriculum, teacher education programs, and social circulation. Additionally, certain practices become widespread through peer influence among teachers. For example, Hülya's classroom design, which incorporates play

centers referred to as *stations*, has been replicated by colleagues, illustrating how instructional practices can spread organically within professional networks. Moreover, widely recognized terms such as *circle time*, serving as a standardized way to describe morning meetings, or *orientation* days, referring to the first days of school, usually lasting half a day and implemented to help children and parents familiarize themselves with the school environment, have become commonplace in many schools. However, while being popularized, some concepts can be misused. For instance, Beyza, who is a preschool teacher graduated from one of the top Turkish universities and working at a public kindergarten, criticizes the wrong usage of *project-based* learning, which originated from the Reggio-Emilia approach now broadly used across various educational settings: "I don't think people really get what project-based education actually means, but it's thrown around a lot—like, 'We do project-based learning.' But what they're actually doing is just picking themes and calling it a project." Similarly, during a personal conversation, a parent with a background in preschool education commented on a school that claimed to follow the Montessori method: "This isn't even a bad imitation."

On the other hand, in schools following a specific educational model, there is a noticeable divergence in terminology. For example, Cansu narrates the activities in her school by using Waldorf terms. One term she repeated throughout the interview was *rhythm*, which in other schools corresponded to daily routine or schedule, but with a difference. This term does not mean an unrelated succession of daily activities, "but implies a flowing quality of movement from one activity into another" (Foster, 2020, p. 55). By analogy with the rhythm of the heart or breathing, the sequence of activities is carefully orchestrated, with collective activities representing expansion and individual actions representing contraction, thereby ensuring harmony and a therapeutic atmosphere in the classroom (Foster, 2020). Cansu mentions their art technique as *wet-on-wet* instead of regular watercolor. In public schools, painting activities tend to be structured, as Gülşah, a public preschool parent, complains about making children color only paint templates all the time. In contrast, the Waldorf technique encourages children to apply watercolor to a wet surface, focusing on abstract expression rather than predefined shapes. This

approach is based on the idea that developing a direct, harmonious relationship with colors externally will serve to manage emotions in their inner world.

Similarly, the Montessori education model has its own terminology, the most widely known of which is "*materials*, the Montessori term designating educational objects for working in a particular subject area (art, music, mathematics, language, science, and so on). This contrasts sharply with traditional education, in which learning is derived largely from texts" (Lillard, 2005, p. 20) and also diverges from mainstream preschool activities based on regular toys. Filiz, who is working at a Montessori kindergarten, introduced these materials. The classroom was divided into special areas by the low shelves, which were convenient for children to reach and for the teacher to see all the children easily. Related materials were located in each area, such as mathematics, language, and science. She showed how they teach children counting and math operations with special materials. When outlining the daily routine, she consistently referred to what the children were doing as *work* rather than activity, play, or practice. Children choose a work by themselves and are supposed to focus on it for a while. They can change work subject or material, but they should continue during their *work cycle*, which means an uninterrupted block of time, since "Dr. Montessori believed that children need sufficient time to delve into work, to concentrate, and to develop their inner guides" (Lillard, 2005, p. 108).

This terminology, which appears serious for the early childhood period, represents the philosophy of the education model, which is criticized for its rigidity by Neslihan and Derya, who sent their children to Montessori schools. As other usages of specialized terms, Beyza mentions the Reggio Emilia terminology, such as *provocation* to mean planned activities to stimulate children's thinking and curiosity, *documentation* for recorded evaluation of children, and the usage of *clay* instead of synthetic play-dough. In schools that do not follow established international education models but instead operate based on their own educational philosophies, their discourse and approach differ from that of mainstream institutions. For instance, while describing the daily flow of the school, Funda used some distinctive expressions. She mentioned that they do not use a *punishment-and-reward system* in their approach to children. When children misbehave, they try to understand the reasons

behind their actions, make them feel understood, and collaborate with them to "extinguish" disruptive behaviors. They also use the *nonviolent communication* technique and its posters of "feelings and needs" hanging on the walls. She explains how they approach and resolve rule-breaking behaviors with an "intellectual" perspective as follows:

> Kids are supposed not to wear costumes at school—superhero costumes, I mean. But if they do, we don't tell them to take them off. The key is looking at it from a different angle—like, "What can we actually gain from this?" One should think a bit deeper rather than just taking the rules at face value. I see that other children are also interested in the costume, so I can think about how I can transform this enthusiasm into something for children. Maybe we could design costumes together, and then maybe organize a fashion show or an exhibition. So, this is the process of intellectualization and deepening. (Funda, 39, manager, private preschool)

This expression does not highlight just the language of its owner, seeing herself as intellectual, but indicates her particular mode of engagement and attitude toward pedagogy. Likewise, the specialized terminology of the mentioned alternative education methods is not composed of superficial concepts but is deeply intertwined with the educational philosophy they advocate. This kind of particular terminology is produced, shared, and perceived in its "linguistic habitus" in Bourdieusian terms. He argues that:

> The specialized languages that schools of specialists produce and reproduce through the systematic alteration of the common language are, as with all discourses, the product of a compromise between an expressive interest and a censorship constituted by the very structure of the field in which the discourse is produced and circulates. (Bourdieu, 1991b, p. 137)

Specialized languages are functional in the sense that they are not independent of meaning and enable communication between those who carry the relevant linguistic capital. While they implicitly serve to identify those who

belong to their community, they also censor or exclude those who do not have that capital.

In these more selective schools, certain routine practices commonly implemented in mainstream institutions, such as issuing report cards and organizing year-end performances, are deliberately avoided on the grounds that they are not pedagogical. For instance, Funda explains that at their school, no grading system is used, and assessments of children are communicated to parents verbally. While official forms regarding cognitive and language development are filled out within the MoNE's system, these evaluations are not shared in the form of report cards to prevent a "competitive mindset" among parents. Similarly, Hazal, whose daughter attends a Waldorf-inspired school, emphasizes the absence of report cards there as well, noting that even games are not played with a competitive mentality.

In other schools, year-end performances may be seen as valuable experiences for children, as expressed by Halime, who runs a school in a district with a C SES score and a mid-range tuition scale. However, Funda criticizes this practice, stating:

> We don't do this because we believe it shouldn't be done. It turns children into mascots, placing them under unnecessary performance pressure. If children themselves want to do something like that, we support them. But it is mainly done to entertain adults. And there is no such thing in terms of the rights of children. (Funda, 39, manager, private preschool)

Similarly, Filiz, a Montessori teacher, takes the same stance, explaining: "At this age, children would get frustrated. Even if some parents request it, we tell them that we don't do it because it can be too traumatic for this age group" (Filiz, 32, teacher, private preschool). Likewise, Cansu, a Waldorf school administrator, describes alternative approaches that do not require children to perform but instead foster collective enjoyment, stating: "We don't hold an end-of-year show. So we don't want the children to go through that stress. Instead, we have a big festival in the forest" (Cansu, 39, manager, private preschool).

Different education methods can be considered to contribute to diversity within the field of ECEC. However, their specialized status, reflecting the educational preferences and tastes of those who adopt them, as evident through their distinctive discourse, creates a distinction between those possessing the necessary capital to recognize and access these exclusive educational services and those who do not.

In conclusion, Bourdieu's concept of distinction is observable in the preferences, tastes, and judgments parents express while navigating early childhood education and care services. These distinctions are largely rooted in the cultural capital families possess, shaping how they assess and engage with educational environments. Families with greater cultural capital tend to distance themselves from stigmatized public schools and, at the same time, express dissatisfaction with mainstream private institutions. Instead, they seek out schools aligned with specific educational philosophies, aesthetic standards, and material choices that are appropriate to their taste. This distinction is also evident in the specialized language, discourse, and unique practices embedded within these selective schools. Ultimately, while such families may frame their decisions as doing what is best for their children, these choices also serve to reproduce privilege and reinforce social boundaries, offering privileged environments that remain inaccessible to those without the same classed resources and awareness. However, having distinct aspirations shaped by cultural capital does not necessarily equate to having the economic means to realize them. The following section will explore the circumstances and strategies of families who, despite their high levels of awareness and ambition, face financial limitations in accessing the ECEC services they desire.

§ 5.4 Entrapment of the Middle Class and Parents' Strategies

In the previous sections, the correlation between parents' awareness, preferences, and practices in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and their habitus, particularly in relation to social class status, has been discussed. Families with high cultural capital tend to make education-conscious choices, influenced by their pedagogical perspective, which confirms the importance of preschool education, their expectations regarding educational

quality, and their aesthetic preferences for institutional environments. Investing in education is associated with the middle class by Bourdieu (1984, p. 125) as an "instrument of reproduction" through which families aim to keep and increase their cultural and, eventually, economic capital. However, the possibility of activating cultural capital is dependent on the related field. As Bourdieu critiques, the social field is not a one-dimensional hierarchy like the "social ladder" metaphor, where capital holders are positioned in a linear manner. Instead, it is multidimensional, requiring an analysis considering both the volume and symbolic meaning of different forms of capital simultaneously (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 119-120).

The relationship between the middle class and education is shaped by a circular dependency between cultural and economic capital within the educational field. The accumulation of cultural capital reinforces the prioritization of education as a means of social and economic security, yet access to high-quality schooling requires economic capital to activate this cultural advantage. However, a particular challenge arises for families who possess cultural capital but lack the economic resources to fully activate it to secure their children's desired educational opportunities. This mismatch between cultural and economic capital creates a distinct form of constraint for the economically disadvantaged sections of the non-monolithic middle class, which I conceptualize as *the entrapment of the middle class*. Unlike low-income families, who often have fewer choices and lower aspirations in school selection, or wealthy families, who can afford any option they prefer, these parents with high cultural but limited economic capital might find themselves in a feeling of entrapment, such that they have a vision of an ideal education for their children but may lack the financial means to secure it.

This entrapment is particularly visible in the ECEC field. The first reason is that the service recipients are mostly middle-class parents, unlike other levels of compulsory education. The second is that a significant part of this level of education currently relies on the private sector. Therefore, a demand side with clear aspirations in the field of education and a supply side dominated by the private sector rather than by the public sector mutually create a situation of entrapment for non-wealthy segments of the middle class in the ECEC field.

This section examines how middle-class families develop strategies in cases where there is a mismatch between their economic and cultural positions, how they adapt their practices in response to economic constraints, and how they position themselves in the educational field, thereby mitigating their entrapment, even if they cannot entirely escape it. By analyzing the ways in which these families negotiate their aspirations, resources, and institutional constraints, this section sheds light on the complex interplay between cultural and economic capital in shaping ECEC choices. Families' strategies can be broadly classified into two main approaches: securing financial solutions to afford their preferred private school or finding a high-quality public school option as an alternative to private education.

To overcome this vicious circle of education requiring capital to yield further capital, one of the financial solutions employed by these families is securing access to desired private schools at discounted rates, thereby partially mitigating the financial barrier while still fulfilling their educational objectives. To exemplify, residing in a neighborhood with a high SES score (A), Neslihan, an academic whose spouse holds a managerial position in the private sector, nonetheless describes the financial burden of their chosen school's tuition as challenging. To mitigate this difficulty, they strategically take advantage of both early registration and one-time payment discounts and pay next year's registration fee in the previous spring with financial support from their own parents. Similarly, Nazlı, an academic and a parent of two children, enrolled them in the same private school, one in preschool and the other in primary school, from which she herself graduated. She states that she benefits from three different types of tuition discounts: a sibling discount, an educator discount, and an alumni discount. Additionally, some preschools have agreements with specific workplaces, offering tuition discounts for employees. Derya, an academic, reports that they were able to enroll their child in a Montessori preschool, normally positioned within the higher tuition range, at a discounted rate due to an institutional agreement between the school and the university where she works. Similarly, Gülsüm shares a parallel experience:

> The school we chose is normally beyond our budget. But because of my spouse's job, we got a discount. Otherwise, it's a school we wouldn't be able to afford. But since we could get it at that price, the price-

> performance ratio was really high for us. For the same amount, I could have sent my child to any regular preschool. But first, there wasn't any highly recommended school nearby. And second, I mean, I'm paying 1,500 TL ($280 at the exchange rate of January 2019) for this school. Its normal price is 2,500 TL ($470). (Gülsüm, 29, parent, private preschool)

This quote illustrates how the parent strategically takes advantage of a workplace-related discount to access a higher-quality private preschool that would typically exceed their financial capacity. In justifying the decision, the parent emphasizes the value of the opportunity, describing it as offering great price–performance, thereby employing a financially rational strategy within constrained economic conditions.

In addition to discounts typically obtained through the activation of social capital, parents also consider merit-based scholarships earned through the child's academic success as part of their future planning. The idea is that, by contributing to their own tuition in this way, the child will alleviate the financial burden on the family, which is already navigating limited economic means. Reflecting on her own educational background, Nazlı mentions that her family relied on the scholarships she earned at a certain stage of her education and that she expects the same from her children:

> For example, I always attended private schools, but was always on a scholarship. At a certain point, I just kept earning scholarships, which actually helped support my family financially. So when I say I studied in private schools for years, it wasn't in a spoiled or privileged way. I mean, I was mostly on an 80% scholarship there. I want to raise my children with the same mindset—like, "Help us out with these expenses, and bring in some scholarship money!" That's something possible around fourth or fifth grade. At that point, we'll try to get them into these scholarship exams. (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool)

Gaining a tuition discount based on the child's academic success is an example of indirectly converting accumulated cultural capital into economic capital. In this case, the parent strategically seeks to transform the early investment in

private schooling into a self-financing cultural capital production mechanism for her children.

Another example of a child self-funding their education is when a family saves the gold gifts received at birth and later allocates them for educational expenses; as Gülay shares, "We save for each child the gold gifts given at birth. Our son actually pays for his own expenses. We allocated all his savings there. I hope he will benefit". (Gülay, 40, parent, private preschool). In Turkish tradition, gold is commonly given as a birth gift. The eventual accumulated wealth depends on the breadth and economic status of the family's social network; the larger and wealthier the circle, the greater the financial contribution. Independent of the nuclear family's regular income, this economic capital accumulation, derived from the family's social capital, can later serve as a financial resource to cover the child's preschool education as a strategy for parents. In this way, Gülay leverages her social capital to invest in her son's early education, securing access to a private school beyond what her regular income would allow.

When middle-income families do find a way to pay for a private preschool, it is usually a "sacrifice." This is because they are spending their budget on their children's preschool education instead of other expenses. Hazal, who returned to Türkiye after giving birth in Germany, enrolled her daughter in a private preschool with a high fee scale thanks to the monthly child benefits she received from the German state. She uses this expression as follows:

> Normally, it is not a price that we can pay on our own with my husband's editorial salary. Therefore, we took advantage of the blessings of Germany and made sacrifices for our daughter as a family, and sent her there. I probably cannot send the twins to this school. (Hazal, 32, parent, private preschool)

Her husband, a Ph.D. degree holder who is seeking tenure at the university and currently working as an editor, is unable to fulfill Hazal's classed expectations about kindergarten choice, which were explained in detail in the previous sections. Although they find a solution by making sacrifices for their first child, when their twin babies start school, she feels that they will not be able to choose the same school they like based on their budget alone. Thus, this

situation is even more challenging for families with more than one 0-6-year-old child. Nuray, a non-working mother whose husband is a lawyer, sent her first child to public school at the age of four but wants to start her second child at the age of three for developmental reasons, saying,

> We will probably have to send him to a private school because of his age group. We will have to cut back on other things and do something for him. But if we send them both to private, that won't work either. We would have to pay more than our rent. (Nuray, 31, parent, public preschool)

Indeed, the prices of private schools are in line with the apartment rents in the districts where they are located. Bahar, who sent her first child to the private Erguvan kindergarten thanks to family support and discounts from acquaintances, and her second child to a municipal day care center, describes the parallel rise between school fees and rents as follows,

> We were really paying school fees as much as our house rent. At that time, the rent was 3,600 TL. 3,200 TL was our school installment at a discount. As much as the house rent. It's the same again. We moved now [after 2 years] upstairs in the same building. Our house rent is 30,000 TL. The price of Erguvan is also 30,000 this year. It goes like this. (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center)

This comparison shows that in order to pay for a child's education and care in a private preschool, parents have to sacrifice as much as the cost of housing for the whole family. As the number of children increases, the affordability of the private sector decreases, especially for the lower-middle class.

A similar narrative of sacrifice applies to relatively higher-income earners in their own consumption segment. Funda, the director of Kehribar kindergarten, which is high on the school fee scale and claims to offer services separate from the mainstream, describes the school's parent profile as follows:

> They're all university graduates. Some of them are even academics. As for their financial status, I'd say around ninety percent are doing pretty well. Economically, they're middle class. Though, to be honest, we hardly have a real middle class left in this country. Our group of

> parents used to be upper-middle, maybe, but with the current gap widening, they basically turned into middle class. They're not exactly upper-middle class now—like, they can afford this school, but they don't have loads of extra money for other things. They can't pay the fees here, travel abroad, own a house, or all that at the same time. Maybe a few of them can. (Funda, 39, manager, private preschool)

Funda points out that there is a general impoverishment in the country, with a widening gap between the richest and the rest of society. In this process, she sees the parents in her school, who used to be considered wealthy, as middle-class now. Even these parents, who live in a neighborhood with an SES score of A, have to cut back on other expenses to pay for kindergarten.

The second strategy for families who are selective but not for economic abundance is to gain access to a "good" public school. This applies not only at the kindergarten level but also to families who initially might choose private kindergarten education, yet later consider public schools for higher levels due to the rising and often unaffordable costs of continued private schooling. Studies have explored how these families seek out or transform public schools at later educational stages. For instance, Özdemir (2018) examines a public middle school to show how active parent networks, fundraising, and customized extracurricular programs collectively serve as a new middle-class strategy for creating a "private-school-like space." Although not every case involves as organized a transformation effort as in this case, gaining access to a well-regarded public school in a decent district is a common tactic for selective families. First, families leverage their social capital to obtain the necessary information about such a school. Second, they must complete the required enrollment procedures. Since public schools admit students based on their residential district, some families choose to move to the zone of the school of their choice. Another tactic, without actually moving, is to transfer their official residence to the house of a friend or relative who lives in that school district or to use the workplace address close to the school for registration, as Demet did. Demet, a working dentist, enrolled his daughter in a private school out of necessity when she was 3 years old, but was not very satisfied. When her daughter turned 4, she transferred her to an independent public kindergarten near her workplace on the advice of her colleagues.

How parents' school preferences are classed according to the capital they own has been discussed in detail in the previous two sections. In addition to the motives for preference, the following case illustrates how they access the desired school. Canan shares her reasoning process while moving to the school zone, as she thinks the environment in the school would be better for her child:

> We live just a street below the school, and the system had automatically placed us there anyway. But the main reason we moved here was actually the school. We were like, "We want a good school in the neighborhood." I mean, we could have lived somewhere else—like not right in the center of Istanbul, but maybe up in Çekmeköy or Ümraniye—maybe even in a more comfortable housing complex. But then we wouldn't get this same vibe in the local school there. We wouldn't get that cosmopolitan texture. Maybe we wouldn't get a safe school environment either. So when we moved here from Maltepe, we thought, "This kid's going to a public school, so let's rent a place close to a good public school." We'd heard about this school from people here and there. Honestly, back in the beginning, it wasn't like, "Oh wow, it's such a great school." They changed the principal a while ago, and the school suddenly became popular. The principal turned things around nicely. Then, what attracted me is that it's a small school. The classes aren't crowded, and the kids come from families who've taught them courtesy and respect. They're familiar with manners. They treat each other well. It's not about wealth. They're people who've civilized themselves, in a sense. That really drew me in. Plus, there are others like us, religious folks. Even though there are secular families, too, there's a balance in the neighborhood. Some have university degrees, some high school, and maybe some only primary school. But there's a sense that you can find common ground with people. The big difference here is how involved the parents are. Around here, every mom and dad is super attentive to their kids. For instance, my sister-in-law lives in Başakşehir. It's a place that gets a lot of migration, so it has a whole different city structure. It's pretty mixed. From what she tells me, there are kids who've been basically sent off to school just to get them out of

> the house—like "Go, and however it goes, it goes." I also have teacher friends over there, and they told me once, for example, how they put liquid soap in the bathrooms so kids can wash their hands, and the kids rip it out and throw it away. It's kind of wild. The teachers can never reach the parents, and they have a hard time finding anyone to talk to about issues. But here, parents pay attention to every detail of their children's school life. I mean, they follow the homework assignments, fulfill what the teacher asks, and check if the children actually learning or not. They're all cooperating. Honestly, I see some parents who are really devoted. They mention the homework as "our homework," right? Me, I'm a bit more laid back—sometimes I let the kid roll along on his own, you know? But it's comforting. At least, I think, "If we miss something, somebody else might catch it." That's why it feels good. I don't want to categorize people or anything, but I do think the level of parental interest reflects on the overall profile in the classroom. That's how I see it. (Canan, 32, parent, public preschool)

This excerpt illustrates how one parent decided where to relocate based on their child's prospective school. Canan could have moved to a more comfortable housing complex on the outskirts of the city for roughly the same cost. However, upper-middle-class and well-off families living in gated communities farther from the city typically send their children to private schools. Since Canan needed a public school, she opted instead to move to a neighborhood closer to the city center upon hearing of a reputable public school there. She attributes the school's rising popularity to a visionary new principal who has improved its quality. This observation highlights how teaching and administrative initiatives are especially critical in public schools, which lack private investors. Yet, Canan's primary reason for choosing this school is the parent profile. Although self-described as religious, they have no issue sharing the school with a parent body of which half are secular. What she values most is that these families exhibit "civilized behavior" associated with cultural capital, which she does not equate with having a high income. Contrasting her neighborhood with other areas experiencing high levels of immigration and sociocultural complexity, where parents are perceived to be more indifferent and children's behavioral problems more frequent, Canan emphasizes the sense of

shared attentiveness among mostly highly educated families where she lives. She believes a social circle grounded in good parenting practices is important for her child, and she relies on this collective attentiveness when she occasionally falls short of keeping up with school.

For middle-class families, choosing a private school can become a necessity if both parents work. This is because most public nursery classes attached to primary schools operate on a half-day basis. In independent public kindergartens, on the other hand, the teacher's shift ends at noon, and club activities take place in the afternoon. In this way, full-day care is provided. However, the salaries of the club teachers and food costs increase the expenses of these schools, and so their fees are several times higher than public nursery classes. Nevertheless, these independent public kindergartens, which are affordable compared to private school fees, are in high demand by families with a certain income. Özge, who is working in Hanımeli Kindergarten, which is a highly-demanded independent public kindergarten emphasizes on waiting list for their school:

> There is a huge pile of enrollment [demand] at the school, and we end up having to turn away at least half of them. That's because if people are working, and if they don't want to send their kids to a private school—either because it's too expensive or, like, some of them are in sketchy places, like basement floors of apartment buildings with no garden, and they'd have to pay even more for that— so yeah that's why there's a serious queue for enrollment, and donations are going around too. [...] If a child is 5 years old and their address falls within the school area, we have to accept them. This is a richer region. Still, there are a lot of children who come here [rather than to a private school]. Here's how we usually do it: if a child starts at age 3, we take their registration, and as long as there's no issue, we keep re-enrolling them every year. Very few start at five because most kids are already enrolled by age 3 or 4. At age 5, we might get like 10 new kids, tops. And this is actually one of the most crowded schools in Istanbul—we have around 200 to 300 students. Normally, independent preschools don't have nearly that many. (Özge, 27, teacher, public preschool)

Hanımeli Kindergarten is located in a district with an SES score of C+, surrounded by shanty towns. However, the district has gentrified areas that Özge refers to as more affluent areas that provide middle-income families who can afford Hanımeli Kindergarten and may choose it over more challenging private alternatives. Özge cites private schools with low price performance, indicating the uneven nature of the private preschool market. In certain cases, public school options might provide more quality education than certain private ones, which makes them worth competing for, as in this one. The teacher mentions the long waiting list for this school and that parents are making donations to secure a place there. This is similar to the case of Demet, whose daughter was enrolled in exchange for a donation, citing the school's renovated garden as the reason. In addition, Özge points out that students who get enrolled at an early age have the opportunity to continue in older age groups, which limits new enrollments directly in those groups. Even though it is one of the most crowded independent kindergartens in Istanbul, serving both part-time and full-time care, Hanımeli Kindergarten still falls short of accommodating the needs of families in the area. This issue is not unique to here; other independent public schools under MoNE, as well as municipal day care centers, also lack the capacity to adequately meet the demand of the local population. For example, Gamze, who works in one of the children's education centers opened by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, says that in her institution, "when a child leaves, there are a hundred people waiting in line to take his place, so the need is high. And this is only in that district, there are even districts where there are no centers yet," (Gamze, 35, teacher, municipality day care center), which confirms the need for new institutions. Some district municipalities use the lottery method for student selection due to the limited capacity of the child care services they offer. Bahar thinks she was lucky to have won the first lottery and enrolled her daughter in a much-recommended municipal day care center in her neighborhood, only to find out that none of her neighbors' three daughters had won the lottery in years (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center). Therefore, luck has become a determining factor in accessing public services offered by highly competitive municipal centers.

Parental attitudes in the examples in this section, such as being selective in choosing a school, making analytical evaluations about providing a quality education and a decent environment, and finding solutions within the existing conditions, can be considered relevant to Lareau's concerted cultivation practices associated with the middle class. In Lareau's study, the provision of extracurricular activities for children, such as cultural and sporting activities, is in line with the attitude of giving importance to branch courses or educational methods during preschool selection in the field of early childhood. However, Bennett et al. (2012) argue that this concerted cultivation drive should not be directly attributed to a social class, i.e., the middle class, citing the example of working-class families with similar aspirations. The authors observed that working-class families try to provide elite cultural activities for their children, but in alternative, cheaper locations such as public schools or churches. Therefore, Bennett et al. (2012) deduce that differences between social classes are more due to "class-related conditions in which they find themselves" (p. 152) (i.e., what parents are able to provide for their children within the available resources) rather than specific class cultures. This is an important contribution against seeing parental strategies as stemming from a conscious class culture that results in labeling them with a particular class. However, they also share some working-class responses, seeing activities as important, not necessarily for the skills gained, but for providing their children access to safe environments, which can be called a general parental instinct rather than a purposeful act resulting from possessing cultural capital. This is why not the class identity or the culture, but class practice, holding certain motivations and aspirations, should be the object of analysis. Seeking cheaper alternatives stems from the economic conditions of families. However, having cultural aspirations and investment motivations signifies a middle-class practice. For example, Nuray finds the physical education classes at her daughter's public kindergarten insufficient and, therefore, takes her to extra gymnastics lessons, yet she makes use of the municipality's affordable services to do so. When her daughter starts primary school, she cannot afford private schooling but attempts to compensate for the educational gap by enrolling her daughter in more affordable extra painting and English classes. Thus, converging desires for "better and more,"

driven by cultural capital and awareness, constitute these middle-class practices, even when economic conditions diverge from those of the affluent.

The data presented in this section show that parental practices and strategies in preschool education are produced in a relational way between agency and structure. As Lareau et al. (2016) show in their field, "The very term school choice implies that the power rests with parents and children" (p. 280) is an illusion. In reality, the structure of the ECEC supply side, which offers services in a deeply uneven manner, is quite binding and, in a way, sets the framework of the game. School selection is not a matter of free choice made by equally informed individuals in a perfect market. Families who are not completely economically independent and who demand a special education method or environment, an earlier age of care, full-day education, qualified teachers, child-friendly physical conditions, etc., should know the rules of the game and play accordingly. The written and unwritten rules to secure a spot in a good school setting can be accomplished by these parents using their available resources. Their strategies include following the early registration periods and opportunities, gaining fee discounts using social networks, utilizing child-based gains as gifts or scholarships, sacrificing other nonessential consumptions, obtaining knowledge about good public options, moving to or registering in those school zones, making donations to the school to ensure enrollment, etc. The ECEC field is thus a competitive arena where those who know the rules of the game and are able to mobilize their capital step forward, thereby utilizing their agency.

§ 5.5 Conclusion

The rules of the game in the field of early childhood education and care are determined by relevant laws, policies on education, care, and employment, actions of numerous public and private institutions providing services, and market conditions. However, the kind of education and care children receive up to the age of six is also shaped by the contributions of their parents, who are the players of the game. These parents use their various forms of capital, like cards in the game, as resources to gain symbolic power. These resources stem from the habitus formed by their own families and accumulated throughout

their lives. This intergenerational accumulation of capital of all kinds, shaped by both structural conditions and the strategic actions of agents, solidifies the class structure of society and continues prospectively in the attitudes of agents towards their children's education. Therefore, the structure of the field and the agency of the parents mutually reproduce social class in society, which is the argument of this dissertation.

This chapter attempts to illustrate the involvement of highly educated, middle-income parents, who constitute a significant part of the recipients in the ECEC field. The role of mothers, who are the more active parents in this field, is demonstrated through their feelings, resources, tastes, preferences, and strategies in the process of receiving ECEC services. Factors such as the non-compulsory nature of early childhood education, its provision at younger ages predominantly by the private sector, and its prominence among mothers concerned about child development have led to families with a certain social status playing a more active role in the ECEC field. The cultural capital possessed by these families, within the limits of their income, becomes decisive in their choice of preschool. Their preferences, shaped by taste, aesthetics, educational models, etc., also serve as a means of distinguishing themselves from social groups they do not identify with or regard favorably. While families' intentions may be guided by a desire to secure the best for their children, such well-meaning actions inadvertently function as mechanisms that reproduce social distinction.

This chapter has examined the classed social consequences of education-based cultural capital, which leads to vertical differentiation within society. The following chapter will explore the role of an identity-based cultural capital, religious habitus, which generates horizontal differentiation, in the intergenerational transmission of values.

6

Passing the Value Cards: Religious Identity Cultivation through ECEC

Education is not merely a vehicle for academic instruction but also a fundamental means of value transmission, shaping how individuals understand norms, roles, and relationships in society. Preschools and day care centers serve this function in early years, a formative period during which children begin to internalize moral codes, social expectations, and behavioral norms. Within this developmental phase, children are also introduced to identity-based values, including religious, ethnic, and national identities, which are often transmitted through the familial habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and reinforced through preschool curricula. While the promotion of social and civic values is common across early childhood education frameworks, religious education is also provided in some preschools in various countries, including European countries and the United States (Uzun, 2022).

Similarly, religious values emerge as a salient dimension in the contemporary Turkish context, where a significant number of parents actively seek preschool environments that align with their own beliefs and religious identity. Parents' ECEC preferences are deeply influenced by their religious habitus. For many families, early childhood is not only a stage of development but also an important period of upbringing during which fundamental religious values can be instilled. In this sense, religious education in ECEC is seen not only as related to developmental and social learning but also as an investment in the

child's moral and spiritual development. However, the educational field is not determined solely by parental preferences; it depends on the structure of available options, constrained and shaped by the political field and market relations. Parents with religious concerns navigate the available options based on their economic capital. While upper- and middle-income families can choose between private preschool institutions offering religious education, low-income families generally rely on state-supported Qur'an courses affiliated with the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA). This differentiation reflects a socioeconomic stratification within the religious field.

In Türkiye, the provision of religious education at the preschool level has historically been subject to state control and shifting political priorities. During secular administrations, Qur'an education for young children was banned or significantly restricted. In contrast, recent political developments have created a more conducive environment for early religious education, supported by the current government, which promotes faith-based education from an early age as part of a broader ideological agenda. In addition, parties requesting and providing religious education evaluate the national curriculum according to its compatibility with their own values and establish a "selective tradition." These relationships shed light on the intersection of the ECEC field and the political field, and thus the results of changing power relations.

Importantly, there is growing concern among parents with increasing cultural capital about the pedagogical adequacy of religious education in early childhood. Discussions are increasingly focusing not only on content, such as basic beliefs, etiquette, or Qur'an literacy, but also on how it is taught. Today, many families prefer educational approaches that emphasize love, emotional security, and age-appropriate participation over coercive or rote methods. These expectations reflect the growing importance placed on child-centered teaching and a pedagogical approach that integrates religious learning into broader developmental goals. This also highlights that the reproduction process of religious habitus entails change. This chapter presents an analysis of fieldwork data to examine how the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in Türkiye functions as a social field in which religious habitus, alongside social class, which was discussed in the previous chapter, is reproduced, particularly through dynamics shaped by agents and the political and

market fields. While also revealing potential for change influenced by developments in the cultural field. I also demonstrate that religious habitus is not monolithic, as its engagement with both the political and cultural fields varies. As the last point, I argue that cultural capital, which is dependent on developments in the cultural field and educational attainment, transforms the religious education field.

§ 6.1 Religious Value Cultivation

Religious habitus, shaped by foundational religious knowledge, beliefs, and everyday practices, plays a decisive role in organizing the lifestyles of its members. In this study, the term refers specifically to the Sunni Islamic religious habitus, which is the dominant belief system in Türkiye. It can be characterized by the presence of *religious sensibilities,* referring to "a range of attitudes, values, and practices that have Islamic underpinnings" (Ozgur, 2012, p. 64). The term " religious sensibilities is commonly employed in both spoken and written contexts to describe a degree of religiosity that shapes not only an individual's personal and spiritual perspective but also their conduct and interactions within society. Describing someone as possessing religious sensibilities generally implies that they are "religiously conscious," however, these sensibilities always comprise many discrete facets (Ozgur, 2012, p. 65). In addition to the degree of personal commitment, the nature of these sensibilities varies depending on factors such as the content, method, and duration of the religious education received; affiliation with a religious community or order; the social and political context; and the cultural capital one possesses. Therefore, religious habitus is not monolithic and does not generate a single type of religious person profile. According to a recent study, religious beliefs and practices manifest themselves in different ways and to varying degrees among the vast majority of Turkish society (Nişancı, 2023). Rather than evaluating their religiosity here, the focus is on how parents' own religious habitus influences their choices in the ECEC field.

The demand for cultivating religious values reflects a broader aim of reproducing parents' embodied way of life. This process of cultivation begins from birth, through parental discourses, rituals, and daily practices, including

unconscious dispositions, before an institutional education takes place. When Sümeyye is asked when religious education should start, she points out the earliest time possible:

> A very classic answer—while still in the mother's womb. I mean, of course, it begins at home. For example, by observing the mother. But more technically speaking, around age four. (Sümeyye, 39, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

This reflects the view that children begin internalizing religious norms and values at a very early age, through observation and participation in the home environment. However, the emphasis here positions the mother as the primary figure responsible for religious education, too, in addition to the regular mothering load shared by others. It implies that this education begins in the womb with learning through sounds and continues, especially by imitating her actions, and signals just how gendered this field is, which is to be mentioned, although this debate is beyond the scope of the current dissertation.

Once children enter formal schooling, experiencing, often for the first time, a social setting independent of their parents, families may evaluate preschool environments not only by quality, safety, or aesthetics, but also by how well they align with their own lifestyle and religious habitus. In line with Bourdieu's claim that "the earliest phase of upbringing… produces a primary habitus, characteristic of a group or class, which is the basis for the subsequent formation of any other habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 43), some parents place heightened importance on ensuring a religious foundation in the early years, which adds a new layer to their anxious mothering.

For instance, Nazlı recounts differing preschool choices made by herself and her sister-in-law, both of whom identify with a religious habitus. While the sister-in-law opted for a secular preschool that emphasizes nature and outdoor activities, but lacks any religious instruction, Nazlı insisted on a religious school:

> But I just couldn't bring myself to do it psychologically, because to me, even one year matters a lot. It must be a place where they receive religious education—where they hear things like "*La ilahe illallah*." I have many relatives who grew up and became irreligious snobs, so every

> year feels precious to me. I couldn't dare to send them to a secular school like my sister-in-law did, because of my own experiences. I think, as much as possible, they should be raised in our environment. (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool)

Her perspective is shaped by personal observations of relatives who drifted from religious life, reinforcing her desire to secure her children's religious identity early on. She views early religious education as an investment, a foundation that, even if not fully understood at the time, will be drawn upon later in life, as a "reserve". In response to doubts about what a three-year-old can comprehend, she asserts that early exposure leaves a lasting imprint. Therefore, she says, "Let's raise our children with our own values to the extent that we can" (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool).

In many preschools with a religious orientation, religious education is framed within the broader concept of values education. Rather than focusing solely on textual or doctrinal content, values education encompasses daily manners and ethical conduct grounded in Islamic etiquette. For example, Feyza describes the content of values classes in her school as teaching children to eat with the right hand and to begin meals with religious phrases. Melike adds that the values education in her institution covers both social behaviors, such as the importance of friendship and responsibility, and basic religious practices like praying and special Friday rituals. Similarly, Serap emphasizes two dimensions: religious education and moral instruction, including respect for parents, reverence for elders, peer interaction, and empathy.

In addition, in some public kindergartens, values education can be provided by the willing teacher or a staff member sent from the Presidency of Religious Affairs if all parents give consent. One public school teacher, Hülya, reports what the PRA instructor teaches in her class, such as greetings in Muslim culture.

Beyond discourse and behavior, spatial connection is also emphasized. Qur'an courses for 4–6-year-olds under the PRA are often located in or near mosque complexes. This proximity enables children to observe religious rituals and become familiar with the mosque environment from an early age. Similarly, Filiz, a teacher at a private religious school, mentions organizing

mosque visits as part of the school's values education program, fostering both symbolic familiarity and religious orientation.

All these discursive, ritualistic, and spatial elements contribute to the construction and reproduction of the religious habitus in early childhood. Early childhood is widely viewed by both educators and parents as the foundational period for transmitting religious identity and values, making it the most appropriate time to introduce religious education, including basic Islamic beliefs, moral conduct, and Qur'anic literacy. As one Qur'an course instructor, Büşra explains, parents often justify their preference for religious preschools by asking, "If we don't teach them at this age, then when will we?" (Büşra, 42, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course). Another instructor, Sümeyye, reports that some parents express a clear desire for their children to learn to read the Qur'an before beginning formal elementary education. Even among parents who prioritize alternative pedagogical models, there is still an expressed interest in basic religious instruction. For instance, Neslihan, although primarily drawn to Montessori-style learning, also emphasizes her wish for her child to memorize simple prayers during these early years, given the widely held belief that young children memorize texts more easily. This belief is echoed by several educators. For example, Filiz (32, teacher, private preschool) observes that young children are particularly receptive to learning at this stage, and İlknur (29, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course) adds that today's generation of children is even more perceptive than before, reinforcing the legitimacy of introducing values education in earlier ages. Meral (32, parent, public preschool)uses the metaphor of a "sponge" to describe how children absorb knowledge in early childhood, underscoring the developmental importance attributed to this period.

Given the weight placed on early religious and moral cultivation, parents also express anxieties about mis-cultivation, that is, the risk of exposing children to values or symbols outside their own religious habitus. For instance, Hazal, whose daughter attended daily child care in Germany before the family relocated to Türkiye, expresses concern upon noticing her daughter drawing images of the Christian cross. Similarly, Bahar, whose child attends a municipal day care where rituals outside her religious framework are occasionally

observed, articulates deep concerns about her daughter potentially internalizing secular norms and deviating from the family's religious path. She shares:

> I sometimes feel a deep fear about my daughter. What if celebrating New Year's becomes something sympathetic and normal for her from such a young age? These thoughts come suddenly. Then people around me try to reassure me, saying, "If you don't do it at home, she won't adopt it." But what if she does? What if one day she chooses a secular lifestyle because of kindergarten? It might sound exaggerated, but these are the things that worry me deep down.—What if she doesn't wear the headscarf? (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center)

Bahar, with these anxieties, expresses deeply ambivalent feelings about the municipal day care center her daughter attends. On one hand, she appreciates several aspects of the school, including its close proximity to home, its independent building with a garden, the thoughtfully designed classrooms, and the professional attitudes of its administrators. She explicitly states that she prefers this public institution over private religious schools, which, despite aligning more closely with her religious habitus, do not meet her expectations in terms of quality and environment. However, her satisfaction is accompanied by recurring concerns, particularly during culturally sensitive times such as the New Year's season. While she observes that Ramadan is not acknowledged within the school, a Christmas tree remains displayed for an extended period, which she perceives as a symbolic imbalance. She additionally expresses strong discomfort with the school's approach to Atatürk, criticizing what she perceives as the underlying mindset by stating that "they worship him." She also expresses disapproval of what she deems inappropriate dress by the assistant director and monitors the illustrations in books given to her daughter to ensure they do not conflict with her values. In a particularly pointed critique, she references the employment of an LGBT staff member at another school, stating: "If we saw a gay person, we would be terrified. A 4-year-old child should not see such a person or even know of their existence" (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center). Such practices and behaviors out of habitus are challenging for parents like Bahar and are perceived as a threat to their children's newly emerging identity. For this reason, both Bahar

and Hazal stated that they rely on extracurricular educational resources such as non-governmental organizations to support their children's religious identities.

In the case of Hazal, who enrolled her daughter in Nil Preschool, an institution she identifies as outside her own habitus, she does not experience a significant threat, primarily because the school follows a pedagogical model that refrains from promoting any kind of national or religious values. Nevertheless, in this environment, which she still perceives as somewhat unfamiliar, she constructs sub-habituses to navigate her position. She notes that among the parent group, which she believes to be so nice but predominantly secular, a small group of religiously observant parents, including herself, formed a separate network, even occasionally coordinating picking up each other's children. Furthermore, she reports feeling more at ease knowing that one of the teachers at the school wears a headscarf.

Parents not only choose preschools that reflect their values to create a sense of safety and familiarity, but also delegate the responsibility of religious education to these institutions. According to Nazlı, "Parents are absolutely incapable of providing moral education. They can only serve a representative function. Besides, what comes out of a parent's mouth is very prone to backfiring." Thus, she believes only a student-teacher relationship can be effective. Neslihan points out that it is difficult for religious education to be completed solely through support at home. Meral, as a parent, also says that they do not have time to deal with providing religious education at home and wishes that the public school their daughter attends offered it as an elective course.

For this purpose, some parents may prioritize schools that offer a religious environment and instruction, even if they are dissatisfied with other aspects of the institution. For example, among the several schools she visited, Yasemin ultimately chose one that emphasized religious education, despite expressing dissatisfaction with the school's physical environment. Similarly, Nazlı expresses frustration with what she perceives as exploitative financial practices in the private religious school her child attends. She criticizes the school's ongoing demands for additional payments beyond the agreed tuition, describing it as a systematic form of monetary abuse that places a burden on families:

> I wanted my child to receive a religious education, but the budget abuse there really exhausted and upset me. Every week, there are new expenses… Almost all religious private schools have some level of exploitation. Honestly, we enroll our children knowing this, because we feel we need that environment. We think the environment will shape them. But none of my friends, none of us, are satisfied with the religious schools we send our children to. We even question their intentions. Still, we end up choosing them because we want our children to grow up in a good environment and retain something of a religious education. Yes, I believe there is financial exploitation. They constantly find ways to charge parents more. But in the end, when your child comes home having memorized a surah, you feel happy. That's what you choose, after all. (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool)

Despite her suspicions regarding the school's financial motives and dissatisfaction with its management, she continues to prioritize the symbolic and moral value of her child being raised in a religiously oriented environment. Her decision illustrates a form of long-term identity investment, made at the cost of short-term financial burdens and institutional dissatisfaction.

Setting aside the profit orientation of certain schools, there are some institutions established in commitment to providing and protecting a religious habitus through early childhood education, demonstrating the same motivation on the supply side. For example, Serap describes the founding vision of her institution as the desire to raise what the founders call "the children we long for," a generation characterized by religious concerns and identity. Similarly, Feyza explains that before establishing the preschool she now runs with her sister, they identified a gap in the provision of values-based education in early childhood settings. Motivated by this perceived lack, they actively sought to build their own competence in this area:

> Since we wanted to provide religious education and also offer spiritual support, we began attending seminars in this field—seminars on how values education should be done in early childhood, how much and what kind of content should be conveyed, and issues related to child

> development. We found some multi-day training programs as well. (Feyza, 32, manager, private preschool)

In another case, Arzu, who is a mathematics teacher with a preschooler child, expresses her dissatisfaction with the available school options and describes how she collaborated with six other mothers to establish their own day care center where they provide values education through a more pedagogically grounded approach inspired by the Waldorf philosophy. These last-mentioned cases illustrate initiatives taken in response to the need for institutions within the early childhood education and care sector that align with individuals' habitus, both in terms of religious identity and pedagogical orientation.

The importance placed on religious value transmission in early childhood is also reflected in the preference of parents, who lack the means to establish a school or send their children to a private religious institution, for PRA-affiliated 4-6-year-old Qur'an courses over regular public schools. Zehra, who is a Qur'an course teacher, states that it advises parents of students who attend its Qur'an courses for one year to send their children to regular preschools the following year, as the course curriculum remains the same every year. However, some parents insist on sending their children back to the courses, believing that regular preschools only offer playtime and that the additional religious education provided by the Qur'an courses is an extra benefit. Similarly, İlknur conveys the dissatisfaction expressed by parents regarding public kindergartens:

> [They say] "Teacher, believe me, it was completely unproductive. There was nothing. They just handed out papers for the children to color and sent them home. Standard cut-and-paste activities, and that was it. No values education, no meaningful content—nothing. We were so satisfied with your course. It was so rich and full. Now we feel like we've been left in a void." (İlknur, 29, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

According to İlknur, many parents from their community shared such sentiments. While acknowledging that this might not reflect every kindergarten, this is how early childhood education was perceived by the families in her network. In another case, Yasemin states that she never considered sending her

own child to a public preschool, referring back to the choices her mother made during her own childhood. While her mother had the opportunity to send her and her sister to a private preschool aligned with their family's habitus, she enrolled their youngest brother in a public preschool. Since he received no religious education there, he developed a different and, in the mother's view, deficient foundation, something she later expressed regret about.

In sum, the reproduction of religious habitus, presented here as a set of embodied dispositions shaped by Islamic values, yet varying across families and communities without a fixed form, emerges as a central concern for many parents and educators, who view this developmental stage as critical for the transmission of Islamic values, identity, and moral conduct. Beginning even before birth, as expressed by Sümeyye, a Qur'an educator, religious education is seen not only as doctrinal but as encompassing daily manners, ethical practices, and spatial familiarity with religious environments. Parents with a strong religious habitus often seek out preschools that align with their values, sometimes overlooking material inadequacies or institutional shortcomings to secure what they see as the proper moral environment for their children. This urgency is often fueled by anxieties about mis-cultivation, children internalizing alternative lifestyles or values that diverge from familial norms, leading some to form sub-habitus networks within more secular settings or to express deep concern over perceived cultural threats, thereby turning to other extracurricular resources providing religious education. On the supply side, some institutions are explicitly established to meet this demand, framing their mission around the preservation and reinforcement of religious identity through values education. Where private options are inaccessible or unsatisfactory, many families turn to PRA-led Qur'an courses as more viable alternatives to public kindergartens. Overall, both demand and supply actors within the ECEC field in Türkiye demonstrate that the cultivation of religious values remains a prioritized and negotiated issue. This process is also structurally shaped by broader dynamics, particularly those of the political and cultural fields, which are analyzed in the following sections, respectively.

§ 6.2 Intersection with the Political Field and Selected Tradition

The fact that religious education in early childhood can become a matter of choice is closely related to the relationship of the ECEC sector to the political field, as well as to how power dynamics within this field have shifted. Although there has always been a segment of society that wished to provide religious education to their children from early childhood, they have only been able to do so through formal institutions when the political conditions became conducive. The legal changes discussed in Chapter 4 determine the extent to which the religious habitus can be incorporated into education in general and into the institutional ECEC sector in particular, which is the focus here. In the recent history of Türkiye, a major political intervention that limited religious education was the military-supported action of 1997. Asad (1999) interprets the reform implemented by the military-backed government then, which extended compulsory secular education from five to eight years, as "a measure designed to stop the growth of Islamic sentiment in the formation of schoolchildren" (Asad, 1999, p. 193). In this political context, where the starting age for Qur'anic education was set at 12 and any earlier instruction was prohibited, religious education in early childhood was not offered in public schools. However, it was sometimes provided covertly in certain officially recognized private schools or informally in *Sıbyan* schools.

Mehtap, who operates a day care center affiliated with the Ministry of Family and Social Services, speaks with hesitation when discussing Qur'anic education provided at the school. In response to the observation that religious education has become more widespread in other schools as well, she says:

> I don't really know, to be honest. Here, we can officially implement the values education program. But we can't say something like Qur'anic education is offered. You can't provide that officially. (Mehtap, 32, manager, private preschool)

While giving a tour of the school, which had been formed by combining three floors of an apartment building, Mehtap also mentioned that Qur'an lessons were held individually and out of sight in the kitchen area. Similarly, Halime

recounts the challenges they faced in the early days of their establishment due to providing religious education:

> At that time, we had a problem; our school included religious education and Qur'anic instruction. That created some challenges because it was not an officially approved curriculum by the Ministry of National Education. So we had to teach it less explicitly, though we still provided it. That part was difficult for us. (Halime, 30, manager, private preschool)

When asked if they faced inspections, she mentions other schools: "It happened a lot. I heard about it often—schools being shut down, fined, or facing other consequences. … We never experienced a direct inspection, but we always felt the anxiety of being inspected. Things became easier after the situation changed," implying the shift of the government to the JDP (Justice and Development Party), an Islamist conservative party, which has been in power since 2002. She confirms that their school was founded in 2006. When it is reminded that the government was led by the JDP even at that time, she replies, "It wasn't in power in 2006. I might be mistaken, though" (Halime, 30, manager, private preschool). This passage illustrates the impact of shifting political contexts on religious education in preschools. It is striking that the school principal misremembers the date when the ruling political party came to power. It may suggest that, although the party was in power in 2006, it was still perceived as not having fully consolidated political control, especially given the civilian and military resistance it faced in selecting its presidential candidate in 2007, and then even followed by a party closure case in 2008. Winning a general election does not necessarily equate to holding absolute power in the political field, though it may represent a first step toward that.

Similar to obtaining political power, in the social and cultural fields, the transformation of symbolic power relations takes time. Indicating this transformation, Bahar reflects on the contrast between her own childhood experiences and the social environment her child encounters today:

> My daughter can tell her classmates about trying on her mother's pink headscarf. I don't think they even get the difference right now. It's not like our time now. It was like there was such hostility back then. I

> mean, when our mother and father came to school, they were treated like freaks, like a bearded pilgrim uncle. My daughter and even my son, who's in third grade, don't have that distinction now. It's not that kind of era now. ... At first, [this change] scared me. But now I think our time was too harsh for a child. We lived in Bahçelievler and went to school in Bakırköy. School was a completely different world. Home was a completely different world. And my parents weren't very confident people. Like, maybe if my dad had been a doctor or something, things would've been different. But he was an accountant, self-employed. We always had money problems and stuff. Maybe if we had had more economic power, we would have felt more confident. I don't know. But Muslims were definitely more oppressed [*ezikti*] then. Like, when I look at my husband's family—his dad is a dentist. Financially, they were probably better off than most of the kids in class. But they didn't even realize it at the time. They didn't reflect that because the family was very idealistic, so they weren't raised that way. We realized this much later, they said. They also lived with that sense of being different. Because there were completely different things at home. You go to school, and it's a completely different environment. (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center)

The narrative shared by Bahar illustrates the shifting dynamics of the social field, particularly in relation to the symbolic power of religious identity within the educational sphere. Her reflections underscore the psychological and social strain caused by the sharp disjuncture between the religiously grounded habitus cultivated at home and the secular, often exclusionary environment of the public school. This tension stems from the fact that secular nation-states not only regulate religious expressions but also marginalize them, especially when they challenge dominant norms (Asad, 1999). In Bahar's account, religious identity was not only culturally devalued but also rendered socially abnormal since her parents were perceived as "freakish" figures when entering the school, a site governed by secular expectations. Although she initially attributes this situation to their financial or professional circumstances, when considering the competent conditions of her family-in-law, her assessment yields the conclusion that religious families lacked the symbolic capital

necessary to assert their legitimacy in these areas. Over time, as the political and social climate shifted, this divide appears to have softened. Nevertheless, the quote, which vividly captures the period in which religious actors were structurally subordinated within the state's secular framework, illuminates both the need and the desire among religious families to secure school environments that align more closely with their religious habitus, as a means of protecting their cultural continuity and reducing symbolic dissonance.

Today, religious values education is offered even in some public kindergartens. Even if it was done covertly during the transition period before it became official (Aksoy & Eren Deniz, 2018), now they are typically initiated either by individual teachers or through protocols led by the PRA, and implemented with parental consent. For example, Leyla, working at a public preschool in a district with an SES score of E, describes how she incorporated a prayer time to teach some short prayers into the children's daily routine after receiving administrative approval and obtaining consent from all parents. Within the framework of a values education activity, she began teaching students selected religious prayers and surahs.

Similarly, Nuray describes how religious education is offered at the public kindergarten she chose for her daughter:

> There's this extra Qur'an class as a branch course. It's a public school, under the MoNE, but still, it has Qur'an education. It all started because the teacher wanted it. Normally, school finishes at 1 p.m., but from 1 to 3, they have extra classes for Qur'an and *Siyer* class. There's no extra fee or anything. It's completely voluntary. The teacher asked for it, and the person who comes to teach does it voluntarily. (Nuray, 31, parent, public preschool)

In addition to teacher-led individual initiatives, formal protocols have also been signed between provincial directorates of national education (under the MoNE) and provincial offices of the PRA. These agreements enable PRA-appointed staff to provide values education in MoNE-affiliated preschools. Özge describes how such a program was implemented in her school, independently of the teachers' own decision-making:

> There was a program like this last year, starting after January. It's apparently a project by the Ministry of National Education. Within the scope of values education, a teacher who graduated from a Faculty of Theology came in and taught only the five-year-old classes. Parents were given a form asking whether they wanted their child to take such a course. The lesson was then offered to the children of those who opted in. (Özge, 27, teacher, public preschool)

The presence of religious education in public kindergartens today marks a significant transformation in the political field and its underlying power dynamics. Two decades ago, such a development would have been virtually unthinkable, constrained by a rigidly secular state ideology that relegated religion to the private sphere, especially in early childhood education. The gradual restructuring of the political field, particularly through the increasing influence of religiously oriented political actors, has altered the balance of symbolic and institutional power. As a result, practices that once operated informally or on the margins, such as early religious instruction, have now entered formal educational spaces with administrative backing.

The ECEC field, shaped by these shifting political conditions, has increasingly become a site where religious value cultivation is carried out officially and institutionally. This occurs despite not being fully legitimized across the entire society, as various actors continue to raise objections on both ideological and pedagogical grounds. For example, Şükran, who has spent her ECEC career in an Atatürkist school environment, voices her objection to the shift in values education toward a more religious orientation:

> In values education, we used to focus on love, respect, tolerance, and respect for elders. Now, values education is handled differently in MoNE schools. It's more like saying the Basmala before meals, certain prescribed prayers, and so on. Personally, I do not believe that religious knowledge should be taught by the school, especially for the preschool age group—and even up through graduation. It should be supported and gradually introduced by the family. That's how it was for us as well. We always went to school with the religious knowledge provided by our parents, not the school. When religion entered the school

> environment, it became a source of pressure and emotional conflict for us. I think we need to distinguish between what is abstract and what is concrete. Unfortunately, children are not yet at a developmental stage where they can fully grasp abstract concepts. In my opinion, not even first grade is suitable for that. Because there are phrases and words that they simply can't make sense of. Prayers contain words whose pronunciation is one thing, and meaning is another, often conveying a deep spiritual message. How is a child supposed to make sense of that? Where are they supposed to place it mentally? That's what I'm talking about. That's why I believe values education should be delivered in the way we define it—centered on love, respect, and tolerance. But religious education, without a doubt, should begin within the family. (Şükran, 37, teacher, private preschool)

For Şükran, religious education belongs strictly to the private sphere, namely, the family, and all children, including those with a religious habitus, should receive early education grounded solely in universal human values, in line with the criticism of AÇEV & ERG (2021). However, when reflecting on the presence of Atatürkist instruction in preschool, Şükran notes that many children begin their education already familiar with these values. She describes almost as if outlining their habitus:

> Even if you don't teach them, children already know about Atatürk. Do you know why? Because the families who choose that school have already taught that. By the way, the school I'm talking about was in Atakent. Most people there are strong supporters of Atatürk. For example, on Victory Day or the anniversary of Atatürk's death, they always hold some kind of event or commemoration. Not like a rite, of course, but there's a real passion for Atatürk. That flag will absolutely wave. They definitely have a poster of Atatürk in their homes. So even if they don't get it from us, those children already know him. They know who Atatürk is. (Şükran, 37, teacher, private preschool)

The teacher illustrates that people in the locality she refers to live within a common value system and pass these values on to future generations through daily practices and occasional rituals, and therefore tend to choose preschool

education institutions that continue to reinforce the same values. This case offers another example of the transmission of an identity-based cultural capital to the next generation, i.e., Atatürkist identity and values, resembling the primary group discussed in this chapter, who express concerns about religious value cultivation in early childhood as a means of protecting their habitus.

Which identity will be predominantly transmitted varies according to the balance of power within the political field. Williams states that educational institutions often serve as key channels for transmitting the dominant culture, making this process both a cultural and economic activity. He introduces the idea of the "selective tradition," a process by which certain cultural meanings and practices from the past and present are chosen, emphasized, and presented as "the tradition." The significant point is the selective nature of this process: specific elements are highlighted while others are ignored or excluded. He points out, "even more crucially, some of these meanings are reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture" (Williams, 1973, p. 9). The ways in which agents who provide and receive ECEC services in line with their religious sensibilities engage with the national curriculum can be analyzed through the lens of the concept of selective tradition.

Filiz works as a preschool teacher at a religiously oriented educational institution that charges above-average tuition and has political connections. She describes how they selectively approach the official curriculum in the classroom:

> How do we teach the Republic? That's the funniest part. We frame it like, 'There used to be a system, now it's changed. Now there's a holiday to celebrate, and we present it from a positive angle. On November 10, we don't even hear the sirens here anyway. We cover those things, but we adjust them to fit [our] rules. For example, we celebrated *Kızılay Haftası* (Red Crescent Week) and *Yerli Malı Haftası* (Domestic Goods Week). That was nice, fun—we did those because they align with our values. *Kızılay* is right for us. (Filiz, 32, teacher, private preschool)

When asked whether parents make specific demands, she emphasizes the importance of knowing the parent profile:

> It's important to know the parents, too. If there's a parent who might raise a concern, we usually focus more on the homeland than the individual. Instead of commemorating the person [Atatürk], we have the kids color flags that day. If we're printing out materials, we usually highlight the soldiers in Gallipoli or the flag, for example. God willing, since we ourselves grew up in this environment, hopefully no one will object. As long as it aligns with our values, we engage in it wholeheartedly. The upper grades do theater and poetry programs for March 18 [Çanakkale Victory Day], and we join in too—because children should learn these things after all. For instance, the national anthem is played over the loudspeaker, and we turn to face the flag. Since it's required to hang the flag in MoNE institutions, it's up. So yes, we still uphold those official practices as well. (Filiz, 32, teacher, private preschool)

The case of Filiz illustrates how each component of the official curriculum is evaluated based on its compatibility with their religious habitus or conservative values, and is then conveyed to children accordingly. Content that is not directly associated with Kemalist ideology is considered safe. Historical events involving Atatürk are presented without emphasizing him personally, instead framed through narratives of patriotism and love for the national flag. This reflects what Williams describes above as the practice of putting problematic elements within the effective dominant culture in a way that supports or at least does not conflict with it.

As another example, Melike, who works as a coordinator in a private foreign-invested preschool, describes the implementation of the curriculum in their school. She states that they follow a play-based pedagogical approach and utilize plans, materials, and themes of certain international education programs such as Creative Curriculum and International Preschool Curriculum. However, she emphasizes that they adopt these systems to Islamic beliefs. Regarding the MoNE curriculum, she explains that they do not cover it in full but only use certain parts of it, like Animal Day. She notes that the parents, some of whom are foreign nationals, do not have specific expectations regarding the national curriculum. She adds that on October 29, they held a schoolwide election and elected a school president. (Melike, 34, coordinator, private preschool)

Hülya, who works at a public preschool and identifies as practically Muslim herself, notes that she is selective in how she implements the MoNE curriculum in her classroom. She explains that she prioritizes content appropriate for young children's age. While she mentions November 10 in class out of obligation, she does not organize any related activities, and she presents October 29 through the lens of democracy and the right to vote.

In addition to determining which parts of the core curriculum are implemented, the alignment of values also plays a significant role in the selection of branch courses. For example, Zehra took the initiative at the Qur'an course where she works as a teacher and administrator, and introduced music and art as branch classes. She explains their choice of instrument and artwork as follows:

> Honestly, we chose the *bendir* because it's traditional, and it's also suitable for the Qur'an course. … In addition, we have a teacher affiliated with our Muftiate who offers *ebru* lessons. We had thought about it before—there are simpler *ebru* kits with trays and such. We were considering using those, but since we now have a qualified teacher and the tools, the children are able to see real *ebru*. We wanted them to be exposed to and become familiar with it at an early age. (Zehra, 27, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

Bendir, a frame drum frequently used in spiritual and cultural contexts, and *ebru,* traditional marbling, are considered culturally and religiously more appropriate for the Qur'an course and the lifestyles of families who send their children there. Rather than adopting mainstream or Westernized artistic practices, the choice to include these traditional forms of music and art reflected the course's desire to offer enriching activities and demonstrates how cultural practices are selectively integrated into early education settings to strengthen shared norms and identity.

On the branch courses, Sevde recounts that while they were looking for a private preschool for their daughters, her husband became highly disturbed upon seeing that one of the schools offered courses such as ballet and children's yoga. He viewed such classes as tools for spreading the "secular doctrine." However, Sevde adds: "When I exercise at home, my daughter does it

too—if I'm doing yoga, she joins in. But my husband was extremely uncomfortable even with the class being named 'yoga." (Sevde, 33, parent, private preschool). Certain practices that were once considered outside the boundaries of religious habitus have started to enter everyday life, such as yoga in this context, or piano lessons, which are also increasingly demanded by religious families contemporarily (Personal observation). However, some parents still interpret them as markers of schools that do not align with their own values and cite them as a concern when choosing a school.

Some of the practices deemed inappropriate in certain schools can be replaced with alternatives in preschools that offer religious education. For example, instead of birthday parties, *Bed-i Besmele* ceremonies (tradition in the Ottoman period, marking the beginning of Qur'an reading) or *hatim* parties (completion of the Qur'an) are held, involving similar elements such as classroom decorations, dressing up, and sharing treats. For example, Sevde states that she was specifically looking for a school where birthday parties were not celebrated. Although in their own family, they do allow their daughter to choose a cake and cut it with her grandparents, they have never held an organized birthday party. When the school principal mentioned that they do not do such celebrations, but only organize Qur'an commencement ceremony where a cake is cut, she responded positively. Likewise, end-of-year performances are adapted into ceremonies where children present what they have learned from the Qur'an or moral teachings, rather than performing dance routines. As a year-end activity, Zehra reports an event called the *Kadim Oyunlar Şenliği* (Traditional Games Festival) in 4-6-year-old Qur'an courses participate. This event features activities such as traditional street games and archery, which are framed as a means of transmitting cultural heritage to the younger generation. These examples indicate that not only the core curriculum, but also elective courses and extra practices are selected within a specific value framework.

Moreover, certain current political issues can also be shared with children to the extent that they align with the religious habitus and conservative community values, even if their pedagogical appropriateness may be open to debate. Sümeyye explains how she addressed a contemporary genocide in her classroom, due to its location being somewhere accepted as sacred for

Muslims. She mentions that children living in the crisis are not happy and not free to play. She advises her students to pray and boycott the products of the occupying country. She shares that she does not hesitate to talk about this issue in class:

> I think I'm able to speak about this openly because of the community I work with. It's pretty clear what kind of community I live in, and I know the mothers by now. That gives me some freedom to talk about it. But I don't go into the terrifying images of war. (Sümeyye, 39, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

Although not formally included in the curriculum, teachers can choose to address current events in the classroom. Sümeyye explains that she does not avoid engaging with such topics, as she lives in a community that shares similar values with the families of her students. This shared environment fosters a collective sensitivity to certain issues and results in parents being supportive, rather than raising complaints, when these topics are discussed in class. Moreover, her ability to speak openly is also supported by a broader political context that has become more accommodating of certain value-based and identity-sensitive discourses within educational spaces.

As seen, identity-based cultural capital influences individuals' educational preferences, including the ECEC field, in ways that are not independent of the structural conditions that make certain choices possible. In some contexts, these identity-based differences draw sharp boundaries within the ECEC field, just as they do in other social domains. For instance, Melek interprets this divide through the increasing ideological orientation of private schools:

> Schools have become very ideological— even preschools. But that's kind of Türkiye's general problem: we look at everything in a super ideological way. It's either one way or the other. I wish there were more neutral schools. I don't think extremes produce good outcomes at that age. Sure, I might want something, and an Atatürkist parent might want something else—but I wish schools didn't lean so far to either end. I wish they could meet in the middle. Right now, the differences between schools are like vast gaps. Private schools have really become ideological.

When asked whether she feels the same about schools offering religious education, she replies:

> Yes, absolutely. It might sound harsh, but that's how I feel. For example, there's a school here run by a religious community—I brought it up to my husband, and he said no. I suggested another one, and again he said no. We just don't want to place our child in an ideological education system. If it's run by a religious group or anything like that, I'd rather stay away. (Melek, 34, parent, private preschool)

Melek, a practicing Muslim mother, shares her hesitation about choosing a school that offers religious education during her search for an appropriate school for her children. Upon assessing her own children's developmental readiness, she felt that receiving religious instruction in early childhood would be challenging for them. However, even if they had been ready, she explains that she would still approach schools affiliated with religious communities with the same distance as she would toward explicitly Atatürkist schools. She supports neutral schools that do not impose any particular identity on the child if such neutrality is truly attainable. Ultimately, she enrolled her children in a nature-based school led by secular administrators, which apparently does not engage in any identity-based value transmission. Yet, it lost its neutral image for her much later due to the stance they took on the hiring of a teacher wearing a headscarf.

Until 2013, teachers in public institutions in Türkiye were prohibited from wearing headscarves, as were all civil servants. Private institutions, however, retained discretion in determining their own policies. Aynur's professional trajectory illustrates the impact of these restrictions. A graduate of child development and social services, she initially worked as a paid (but not formally appointed) teacher in a state school, during which time she removed her headscarf on her way to work. Later, in Ümraniye, a district with a more religious social environment, she was able to work in private schools while continuing to wear the headscarf. Following her marriage, however, she moved to Maltepe, a more secular district, where she faced severe barriers to employment. After applying to approximately fifteen schools, she learned that none were willing to accept a teacher wearing a headscarf; even municipal nurseries

stipulated that she could only be employed if she removed it at the workplace. Consequently, she remained unemployed for an extended period until she eventually secured a position at a school with a headscarf-wearing administrator (Aynur, 44, teacher, private preschool).

Headscarves can still become a symbolic issue of discrimination within the private school context, where some institutions not only select their staff but also screen prospective families, as illustrated by Zeliha's account. Living in a secular neighborhood, Zeliha was searching for a school for her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, whom she needed to enroll before returning to work after maternity leave. Because of her daughter's age, she had to consider private institutions. She recounts that during a scheduled visit to a branch of a luxury chain private school, the staff, upon seeing her wearing a headscarf, denied the existence of her appointment and refused to meet with her. While she was crying in the car, her husband noticed another school on the same street, they decided to try it, and were warmly welcomed and successfully enrolled (Zeliha, 35, parent, private preschool).

In fact, schools that align with Melek's preferences, which avoid identity-based value transmission, are very limited in number. Preschool institutions tend to position themselves along a spectrum of religious and Atatürkist values. To understand how religious education-oriented ECEC institutions, focused on in this study, construct their curricula, it is meaningful to examine how they engage with other value systems. The curricula implemented in these schools, due to their incorporation of such values, can be analyzed through Bernstein's concept of *classification* (Bernstein, 1996). In the field of education, field theory offers a useful framework for analyzing power relations, such as which power groups are able to establish schools and who has access to which types of institutions. However, a closer examination of how the curriculum is determined and constrained, where Bernstein's analytical tools become particularly valuable, can provide a deeper understanding of the relationships operating within the field. As explained in the second chapter, Bernstein uses the term classification while analyzing the relationship between the content of the curricula, which reflects the distribution of power, authority, and control in the field. While he mostly refers to the distinction between the

subjects, like linguistics and mathematics, here I draw on the term to examine the relationship of religious subjects to the official curriculum's content.

The Ministry of National Education's 2013 Preschool Education Program opens with a photograph of Atatürk accompanied by one of his quotations. The program began with an emphasis on raising citizens committed to Atatürk's reforms, principles, and nationalism, as a core component of the broader objectives of Türkiye's national education (MoNE, 2013). Whereas the *Maarif* (Education in Ottoman Turkish) Model, introduced in 2024, places Atatürk in the preschool curriculum under a subheading within the social skills domain. The Atatürk topic is introduced primarily in the scope of national holiday activities of the designated days and weeks program (MoNE, 2024b). The relationship of religious education-oriented schools to the official curriculum in terms of including Atatürkist values can be observed in three distinct patterns: 1. avoidant/selective engagement, 2. reluctant incorporation, and 3. embracing integration, reflecting a continuum from strong to weak classification, in Bernstein's terms. I will exemplify these patterns with religious education-oriented schools' attitudes, with the addition of parents' aligned perspectives, derived from the data.

For the first group, characterized by *avoidant/selective engagement*, the cases mentioned while discussing the selective tradition above can also serve as examples. In her account, Cansu highlights the relatively autonomous position of private schools with respect to curriculum implementation. Although these institutions are officially required to complete the daily lesson plan in line with the MoNE curriculum, which is subject to inspection, they are, in practice, able to apply educational methods of their own choosing. In line with this, Melike noted that the official curriculum was largely not implemented at her private school, while Filiz explained that subjects were selectively taught based on their alignment with the school's values. In addition, 4-6-year-old Qur'an Courses under PRA are not formally bound by the MoNE curriculum but incorporate national values under the framework of "values education," often with an emphasis on patriotism (PRA, 2014).

There are parents who are strongly opposed to Atatürkist education during early childhood. For instance, Feyza recalls one parent who "didn't want her child even to see a picture of Atatürk." As a solution, the school notifies the

parent in advance when an activity related to Atatürk will take place, and the child is kept at home on that day. Similarly, during her school search, Sevde initially liked a school but decided not to enroll her daughter there after seeing an Instagram post of the school with the theme "Atatürk did not die; he lives in our hearts." She then began questioning how the other schools she visited celebrated national holidays. Regarding her daughter's exposure to Atatürkist education, she states:

> She'll inevitably be exposed to it at some point. I mean, we were all exposed to it—maybe we've managed to shake off some of it, maybe not all. There's no escaping it, and I'm not going to put my child in a completely isolated environment. But we thought at least she could be exposed to it later rather than sooner. (Sevde, 33, parent, private preschool)

Similarly, Yasemin explains that she might have considered a pilot (higher-standard) public kindergarten for her son, but chose not to enroll him because she believed "there was no need to start with Atatürk-related things at such an early age." Instead, she opted for a school that prioritized her own religious sensitivities. However, she later observed that national holidays were celebrated there with unexpectedly strong emphasis. She attributes this either to the school's own perspective (embracing integration) or to fear of not complying with the curriculum (reluctant incorporation). The following year, she found a school with no Atatürkist instruction at all and expressed her satisfaction with this choice (Yasemin, 29, parent, private preschool).

The second group, with *reluctant incorporation*, consists of schools that, due to their own value perspective, do not wish to address every aspect of the national curriculum but are obliged to do so. For instance, Hülya, who has a religious habitus and works at a public nursery class, expresses her reluctance about addressing the subjects of national holidays and Atatürk; however, she is obliged to cover the entire curriculum since she works at a public school. In addition to official obligations, expectations of parents and even residents around can make schools have a certain attitude in the implementation of the curriculum. Feyza, who runs Şebboy Kindergarten, a private school offering

religious education, which was even her primary aim while entering this business, in a secular-dominated district, expresses her situation:

> We're affiliated with the MoNE, and we're located in Göktürk. I think if there's a dominant value in your environment—something that stands out—it's best not to go directly against it. I mean, what's the point in loudly protesting and saying, "I don't agree with any of this"? That doesn't benefit me at all. In fact, it usually causes more harm than good. So I look at things through the lens of what's halal or haram, and whether it sits right with my conscience. These children are going to hear about national holidays—how far can we really shield them from it? But what do I do? I don't teach it with heavy nationalist emotion or some kind of superiority narrative like "I was born Turkish, I'm special," or with that romanticized tone—"blond hair, blue eyes, the day Atatürk was born," and so on. I just say something simple, like "Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was our country's first president. He passed away today—this is November 10." That's it. Or, for Republic Day, we did a handprint activity around Atatürk's photo in class. I even led that activity. All I said was, "Atatürk was our first president." Nothing more. I don't think I'm putting a heavy meaning on it, you know? And honestly, the parents expect this. That Atatürk photo—they expect it to be sent home. Because parents come in and say, "I want my child to know about God, but also know about Atatürk." They say it in the same sentence. "They should know our national values, teacher." If you look at the wall, there's a big picture of Atatürk. I have to do that. We even make a folder for designated national days and weeks. These things have to be documented for inspections. You fill them out somehow, but like I said, parents also expect this. Take our Republic Day celebration, for example—we held it in the garden. We played the national anthem. I mean, the kids weren't really listening or standing still or anything. But if you saw the public playground next to our garden wall. The people who were there or watching from their balconies—they all stood for the anthem. They even sang along with all the songs. That's the kind of neighborhood this is. (Feyza, 32, manager, private preschool)

The words of Feyza, the manager of private Şebboy Kindergarten in Göktürk, a district with a B+ SES score and mostly secular living community, show how educators manage the interaction between the requirements of the state, personal religious beliefs, and the expectations of the local community in such a way that can even be described as pragmatic. As a practicing Muslim, Feyza adopts a cautious, compromising stance, rather than directly opposing the dominant secular-nationalist values, emphasizing that open resistance would be both ineffective and harmful. Instead, she filters state-imposed symbolic practices such as commemorating Atatürk or celebrating national holidays through her religious conscience and prefers to accept them in a minimalist, fact-based manner, rather than emotionally or ideologically charged presentations. This approach reflects a strategic and low-intensity alignment with the national curriculum, fulfilling official obligations without fully endorsing their symbolic weight. Feyza also highlights the complex coexistence of religious and secular expectations within the community, noting that even religious parents expect some interaction with national symbols. In addition, the local community's reaction during national holiday celebrations shows how deeply these rituals are embedded in that peculiar social fabric. Thus, Feyza's account demonstrates how certain religious education-oriented school leaders handle state ideology through reluctant incorporation. Even if they are not convinced by all the values the official curriculum covers, they manage the activities considering their own perspective, official enforcement, and social pressure.

A similar case is shared about Erguvan Kindergarten by Bahar and Canan, who participated in the research as public school parents, but both sent their older children to this private kindergarten. Previously operated by a religious foundation, Erguvan Kindergarten, located in a predominantly secular neighborhood with an A-level SES score, was scheduled to close due to financial losses. In response, the administrator took over its management and, in order to make the school financially sustainable, began offering both religious and non-religious classrooms based on the demands of the local community. Canan, who knows the administrator personally, finds this shift reasonable, explaining that her desire "to appeal to a broader audience beyond a specific group" (Canan, 32, parent, public preschool) stems from economic necessity.

In contrast, Bahar expresses discomfort with such a division and states a preference for mixed classrooms. She also notes that two distinct parent groups have emerged within the school; one group seeks assurance that their children will not receive religious instruction, while the other, which supports religious values education, perceives the growing influence of the secular group as a "shift in direction" and voices concerns about it. This case presents a distinct example in that the religious–secular divide is experienced not between different schools, but within the same school across separate classrooms. While differing value systems are not fully integrated into a shared curriculum, they are nonetheless offered within the same institutional space out of necessity.

To illustrate parents' perspective on reluctant incorporation, Bahar's sharing can be given, explaining the extent to which she accepts Atatürkist practices in her child's education:

> I'm fine with them commemorating Atatürk on November 10—let them remember him, sure. But I just don't want them doing weird things in front of his statue. Because that does happen in schools… laying flowers, wreaths, and all that. Those very ceremonial, ritual-like things really make me uncomfortable. If they just left that out… I mean, I'm okay with national holidays, too. Now they've started dressing kids up in these themed outfits—red skirts or pants, white t-shirts with Atatürk's face on them. That's new, just the past couple of years. I got the one with just his signature on it, not his picture—on purpose." (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center)

This quote shows how some parents navigate these practices selectively, accepting official commemorations but resisting what they perceive as symbolic excess. In line with this, during a focus group meeting with parents from a private religious school, some voiced their discomfort with what they saw as "excessive" Atatürkism. After talking about a school that provides religious education, one says:

> Participant 2: But when you think about the opposite—like with the first school I sent my older son to. It was a regular private preschool. We'd sit down with Atatürk; we'd stand up with Atatürk again.

> Participant 3: Yeah, they're being ridiculous. Everything has its limits. Sure, let them learn about Atatürk, but…
>
> Participant 2: It was like our whole life became about Atatürk. (Focus group, avg. 40, parents, private preschool)

Even if they present Atatürkist schools as the opposite of the religious schools, parents in the focus group accept this type of instruction to a certain extent but criticize it when they perceive it as "excessive."

In the third group, *embracing integration* refers not to a sense of obligation but to a willing acceptance of the coexistence of religious and Atatürkist nationalist instruction in ECEC curriculum. Some schools adopt this approach as part of their educational position. Serap, a teacher wearing a headscarf and working at Orkide Kindergarten, a private religious education providing preschool in Alibeyköy, a district with a B SES score, describes the instruction of religious and Atatürk-based nationalist values together as the necessity of the reality of Türkiye:

> We speak to both sides, really. Like, we celebrate the *kandil* nights, and we celebrate April 23rd. We do events for both. We celebrate Ramadan Eid, and we celebrate Victory Day too. Whatever the reality of Türkiye is, we're behind that reality. Some schools—I'm not sure why—maybe because of their parent base, avoid doing anything related to Atatürk or Republic Day. But at the end of the day, we're in the Republic of Türkiye. We need to teach our children about our values. And we do. We talk about Prophet Muhammad, and we talk about Atatürk too. But when I talk about both, I always frame it through love for children. Because kids don't understand politics, they don't need to. So we talk about Atatürk's love for children, his love for nature. And the same with the Prophet. We explain both through very human emotions. (Serap, 45, teacher, private preschool)

Serap's account reflects a pedagogical approach rooted not in obligation, but in a genuine commitment to balancing religious and national values within early childhood education. The educator emphasizes the school's dedication to celebrating both Islamic and national holidays, framing the institution as

embracing the full spectrum of the country's social realities. Rather than treating religious and national values as opposing ideologies, this approach presents them as complementary components of Türkiye's cultural fabric.

Reflecting the views of parents embracing integration, those mentioned by Feyza above, who expressed a desire for their children to learn both religious and national values, can be an example. A similar parent profile can also be found at the school attended by Berra's child. Parents who were previously observed as high-income but of medium cultural level are supportive both of the provision of religious education and of the celebration of national holidays at the school. Since it is considered a school with strong academic performance in the area, secular families also choose to send their children there.

Feyza, a religious school administrator previously categorized as with reluctant cooperation, expresses her discomfort with the growing trend among religious parents to actively embrace Atatürk:

> There are some classic things I personally don't really like. I don't know—maybe I should call it the JDP mindset? It's this shift where nationalism is pushed to the forefront, and suddenly everyone's celebrating everything about Atatürk. You can really see that change on social media, too. There's a big difference between now and ten years ago. Unfortunately, that trend has spilled over into our pious circles as well. Honestly, aside from a few truly questioning, conscious parents, almost everyone now expects national holidays to be celebrated. They just say, "Of course, there should be national values" at preschool. (Feyza, 32, manager, private preschool)

Feyza's account highlights the existence of schools where religious and Atatürkist values are transmitted side by side, reflecting a weak classification between the two value systems. It also points to segments of society where these values coexist. However, her association of this worldview with a particular political party illustrates how political discourse and the broader political climate shape social practices. She does not view the embrace of this ideological convergence as appropriate for religious families and expresses criticism toward those who adopt it. Still, she notes that "questioning and conscious"

religious parents continue to maintain a distance from Atatürkist discourses and practices through national holiday celebrations.

§ 6.3 Pedagogical Concerns through Increasing Cultural Capital

Religion is a doxic field, by its very nature, that mostly involves unquestioned beliefs and traditional practices. For Bourdieu (1977), doxa is the "absolute form of recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition of arbitrariness" (p. 168), and every agent who follows social convention accepts it tacitly. However, doxa can be shaken under certain circumstances. Byrne and Divine explain that

> Doxa can only be questioned when there is both a crisis which destroys the self-evidence of natural order, and when the dominated have resources (material and symbolic) to reject it. When a crisis occurs, the language of the establishment is disputed and the language of discourse becomes an 'authorised language', commanding attention. (Byrne & Devine, 2017, p. 31)

The authors point out two cases in which doxa is disputed: first, when a social crisis damages the status quo order, and second, when people under the doxic symbolic power obtain capital and means to turn down the order. Therefore, religious doxa can also be challenged when a crisis disrupts and undermines the self-evidence of the existing order, based on the former case. As an example of crises challenging religious doxa, Byrne and Divine (2017) mention that the child abuse scandal has triggered a crisis in the taken-for-granted authority of Catholicism in Irish society, leading to a widespread questioning and contestation of the Catholic Church's once-dominant role and influence. In the Turkish context, religious communities and orders had been favored in religious education by not only their members but also other religious segments of the society. However, the attempted coup d'état, which was executed by a globally organized religious community in 2016, damaged the trust in religious orders and communities that had been providing religious education. For example, Nazlı complains about the limited desirable schools providing religious education, "since the schools of religious communities turned out

very problematic, most people in my circle avoid sending their children to this type of school, worried that there might be an issue afterward" (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool). In addition, as in the second case, agents embedded in doxa, who reproduce the social order in normal conditions, might have the power to change it when they have access to more capital.

The most significant feature of the informant group in this dissertation is their possession of cultural capital. As discussed in Chapter 5, their educational background significantly shapes their class-based expectations, preferences, and practices when engaging with early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Their cultural capital, stemming from their higher levels of education as well as the evolving cultural field, also contributes to a child-centered pedagogical perspective, which determines their school choices, particularly in relation to how religious values are transmitted to their children. As a result, many reject traditional, discipline-based methods of religious instruction in favor of more child-centered approaches. To more closely examine the preferences and concerns of these parents with a religious habitus regarding early religious education, I draw once again on Bernstein's terminology.

Preschools differ not only in the curricula they adopt, as discussed in the previous section, but also in how they deliver that content. Bernstein (1996) conceptualizes this "how" question through the term *framing*. In this framework, strong framing refers to the educator's control over the selection, sequencing, pacing, criteria, and social base of learning, while weak framing emphasizes the learner's autonomy, interests, and pace. When applied to religious education, strong framing manifests in a highly structured, disciplinary approach that relies on traditional teaching methods, coercive reinforcement, and assessment based on the child's progress in Qur'an recitation. In contrast, weak framing is characterized by a pedagogically sensitive approach in which the teacher considers the developmental appropriateness of the content, encourages love for learning without coercion, avoids competitive comparisons, respects individual learning speeds, and adopts a friendly, non-hierarchical stance. Those parents and aligned educators with greater pedagogical knowledge and awareness are more inclined to favor weak framing approaches, differing from strongly structured educational frameworks. As a

result, the way religious education is framed becomes a decisive factor in their educational choices. This section provides the pedagogical concerns of parents and educators while engaging the services in the field of ECEC, using the scheme of framing, following its sub-categories.

Highly educated religious parents are concerned with preserving their religious habitus through early value transmission to their children; however, this is not their only concern. They also place significant importance on the pedagogical style to which their children will be exposed. Yet, the available options in the early religious education market, including institutions affiliated with MoNE, MoFSS, PRA, and various religious communities, vary considerably in terms of instructional approach, which makes it especially difficult for highly educated parents to find options aligned with their expectations. Nazlı describes the struggle to find a suitable school within religious circles as a "handicap", since she finds their level of pedagogical development incompetent:

> I'm experiencing the handicaps of our community. In my opinion, secular circles are much more advanced when it comes to education. Truly, they are way ahead. There's more feedback because they're stronger in the psychological sciences. That maturity—that culture around education—is much more developed. But we're handicapped. (Nazlı, 33, parent, private preschool)

Similarly, Yasemin expresses doubts about the pedagogical qualifications of teachers working in religious schools during her school search. Fortunately, the school she ultimately selects surprises her by fully meeting all her expectations. In this relatively underdeveloped early religious education market, parents try to find schools that align with their own criteria and preferences.

I will cover the approaches of parents and educators about early religious education by referring to the sub-categories of framing in this section. The most fundamental part of framing is *selection*, implying here what parts of the religious beliefs and practices are to be included in the content of instruction in class. For instance, Bahar explains why she avoids schools affiliated with religious communities since she does not trust the content to be compatible with children:

> I'd rather my child not receive any religious education at all than attend a school run by the L Community.[1] Maybe I'm exaggerating—they might just be teaching the Arabic letters or basic religious knowledge. It's not like they're introducing their spiritual leader or anything. But I still have this fear. What if something harmful is taught? Because there's no oversight whatsoever. You don't know what kind of mindset the teacher they've appointed has. Will they tell the child, "You washed your hands three times, that's not enough?" Or say, "If your clothes have urine on them, you'll suffer in hell?" I mean, maybe they don't say things like that anymore, but still—you never know. There's no guarantee. (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center)

She expresses concern that, due to the lack of inspection by a higher regulatory body like the Ministry of Education, religious community schools may instill ideas she finds frightening or inappropriate for children. She extends this concern to some private schools as well, criticizing what she perceives as a rigid and dogmatic mentality:

> I just think they'll end up putting something wrong into my child's head. I'd rather they learn nothing at all than learn religion through superstitions from the wrong person. I didn't trust the L Community for that reason. And by the way, I've never been to a Qur'an course myself—and thank God for that. But my husband's family used to talk a lot about it. My sister-in-law was sent to a course run by the L Community, and my husband to one by the H Community. They stayed for two or three months as a summer camp. Their stories were terrifying. I'm afraid that kind of mindset is going to resurface. It's so shallow. I don't want to say 'traditional,' that wouldn't be the right word. It's more

[1] L Community refers to a Hanafi Sunni Muslim religious group in Türkiye, founded in the early 20th century by a prominent Islamic scholar. The community is known for its historical opposition to formal state ideology and institutions, prioritizing religious education, especially through residential Qur'an courses founded across Türkiye and in diaspora communities since the 1950s. In recent years, the group has begun establishing official private schools and has also entered the field of early childhood education through kindergartens that typically incorporate religious education based on traditional teaching methods.

> rigid—narrow-minded, like they wear blinders [at gözlüğü]. It's that community mindset [cemaat kafası]. (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center)

Based on her relatives' negative experiences in community-run Qur'an courses, she has developed a clear notion of what she calls a "community mindset" and deliberately avoids private schools she believes operate with this same perspective. She does not equate this type of instruction with all forms of traditional education, acknowledging that the values she wishes to transmit to her child include certain traditional elements. However, she draws a clear distinction between those and what she perceives as superstitious or dogmatic interpretations of religion. Therefore, the selection in the framing of early religious education is crucially important for these parents.

The *sequencing* of content is also significant, as pedagogically aware parents and educators often object not to the content itself, but to the timing, namely the age at which it is introduced. For instance, Elif became convinced that no academic content should be introduced in early childhood after being influenced by the philosophy of the Waldorf preschool her child attends:

> To be honest, I really don't think it would be a problem if our kids didn't do anything academic until the age of seven. They promised us that, and I believe in that logic. I truly believe what children need right now is to play. And if you meet their current needs now, it'll be easier for them to meet their other needs when the time comes. Everything should be done at the right age. (Elif, 29, parent, private preschool)

Those who believe in a play-based pedagogy are of the opinion that the 0–6 age range is not suitable for certain, or in some cases, any, forms of instruction, even if they do not question the accuracy or value of the educational content itself. When it comes to religious education, practices such as learning to read the Qur'an in Arabic, memorizing selected verses, and performing salah are not out of their religious habitus; on the contrary, regularly practiced in their daily lives. However, they consider it developmentally inappropriate to introduce these practices to children aged 0–6 or to expect full mastery at such an early stage.

In PRA Qur'an courses, religious instruction is expected to be evaluated and adapted according to the developmental stage of the children. Teachers who are aware of the importance of timing take this into account when designing their lessons. For instance, Sümeyye states that they avoid talking about certain abstract concepts such as heaven, hell, or angels. In addition to these postponed creedal teachings, progressing in Qur'an education is also sequenced later, after early childhood, in some cases. A statement from Emine, who lives in a high-SES neighborhood and enrolled her child in a Qur'an course to avoid full-day private preschool, offers an example of this concern:

> At the very beginning, our teacher gave us this explanation—which I think she felt she had to do based on feedback from other parents—and honestly, I really appreciated it. She said something like, 'Especially for this class of four-year-olds, we're not promising anything academic, neither in Turkish nor in Arabic religious knowledge. That's just not part of our curriculum. What we do here is all about helping the child enjoy being here, playing, and building a safe, trusting relationship. If you're expecting something academic—especially things like starting to read the Qur'an or memorizing surahs—then I feel obliged to tell you at the beginning of the semester so you can find another school that's a better fit for you.' And I really liked that. (Emine, 35, parent, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

This account reveals that there are also parents who are more impatient when it comes to their children learning the Qur'an. Teachers in other PRA Qur'an courses similarly express discomfort with this type of parental pressure:

> A parent said to me, "It's been so long, and my child still doesn't know anything, teacher. Still hasn't learned." I mean, even though I talked to them about it at the beginning of the year, she came and told me off, for example. She told me this as a reproach, but the father has gone crazy. She came at me like she was demanding an explanation: "Why isn't my child reading yet, teacher?" (Sümeyye, 39, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

Although the teacher had informed parents at the beginning of the year about the course content, which does not guarantee that children will start reading the Qur'an, some parents, who prioritize rapid progress in religious education over pedagogical appropriateness, may still pressure the teachers. Another teacher, Büşra, explains that such families, dissatisfied with the pace of PRA courses, often opt for religious community-run schools that offer more intensive instruction:

> Still, community-run Qur'an courses are also preferred. People think like this: one of my relatives, for example, took their child to a course run by the L Community. Because in their view, we have children memorize fewer surahs and offer fewer Qur'an lessons. But over there, the lessons are stricter. *Diyanet* (PRA) has this image in people's minds that things are more relaxed, more laid back. (Büşra, 42, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

While PRA-affiliated Qur'an courses are criticized by secular segments of society for offering religious instruction too early, others criticize them for not being intense enough. However, not all teachers working at these institutions share the same approach. In one example, Büşra recounts a question raised by another teacher at a seminar held by the Muftiate, criticizing it with surprise:

> When I first started teaching 4–6 age Qur'an courses, I attended seminars at the Muftiate. One time, a teacher stood up and asked, 'I'm having a hard time getting them to perform the noon prayer every day.' And I was just stunned—like, wait, what? The kids are performing noon prayer? Ten rakats? That's not a thing! It's not even in the curriculum. There's nothing in there about making kids pray. So, how are you doing this? And he says, 'Well, I'm just getting them used to it.' But that's not an acceptable answer. (Büşra, 42, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

Although daily prayer is a practice Büşra personally approves of and observes in her own life, she describes the expectation for 4–6-year-old children to perform it daily as shocking. Similarly, she mentions that she has warned other teachers within the same institution who were pressuring children to quickly

learn to read the Qur'an and complete it. She also shares a personal observation that teachers with backgrounds in community-run courses tend to be more inclined toward such insistent methods. Sümeyye also says she couldn't believe it when she heard that children in community-run courses had completed a full recitation of the Qur'an (*hatim*):

> I honestly don't understand how a child can complete a *hatim*. I've been in this field for two years. I have two children myself, and I just can't figure it out. Completing a *hatim* is really difficult. They get bored—they just can't read for that long. I can only get my child to read half a page right now. I can't get him to read more than that. He just can't sit still for that long—he can't focus on anything for very long. (Sümeyye, 39, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

As a Qur'an course teacher, she struggles to get even her school-aged child to read more than a short portion, and given today's shortened attention spans of children, she finds it difficult to understand how children in community courses could possibly complete an entire *hatim* within the boundaries of pedagogical appropriateness.

The personalized nature of timing and sequencing is subject to another element of framing, which is *pacing*. The very same instructional content may not be appropriate for each child at the same age. Conscious teachers evaluate each child's developmental readiness individually. For instance, Sümeyye, in the case mentioned above, explains how she tried to reassure the complaining parent by telling them that their child simply wasn't ready yet. Similarly, Emine, as a parent who was pleased that children were not pushed too hard in the PRA course, expressed her belief that religious education should be spread out over time and approached at each child's own pace. Similarly, Melek, who had chosen a school without religious instruction, notes that while she does plan to provide religious education to her children eventually, she believes it's too early for them at this stage:

> I feel the absence of it, yes. But I don't think the time has come yet—at least not for my kids. Some kids pick things up really quickly, but mine aren't there yet. So for now, yes, it's something missing, but our time hasn't come yet. (Melek, 34, parent, private preschool)

A more nuanced assessment is required in educational processes where children develop at their own pace and according to their unique capacities. Relatedly, another aspect of framing is *criteria*, that is, the standards by which children are evaluated. A previous section (5.3) mentioned the selective schools and parents who are sensitive about the evaluation of children and deliberately avoid certain practices such as issuing report cards and organizing year-end performances, on the grounds that they are not pedagogical. In religious education, when tangible achievements like completing Qur'an reading are introduced alongside the internalization of general moral values, children can easily find themselves in competitive environments. Cansu, the administrator of Toprak Preschool, which serves both religious and secular families and does not provide religious education, reflects on this concern:

> Teaching the Qur'an is tough. It's an important discipline. You need to spend a serious amount of time teaching it to a child. Let's say you do teach it, and the child finishes all the stages and completes the Qur'an—well, that's a big achievement. Doesn't that child deserve a reward? Sure, they do. So we might do a ceremony, make a circle, celebrate it. But you can't explain that to the other kids. You can't just say, "You'll do it next year too." That would already hurt their confidence. And maybe that child will never feel the same level of interest again. It's hard to grasp how that feels for a child. That's why we don't want to go into it too much. Families who insist on that kind of thing can choose other schools. The ones who say, 'It's okay if they don't learn it now—I can teach them later. It's just too early.' are the ones who stay with us. (Cansu, 39, manager, private preschool)

Even among religious families, some prefer to delay Qur'an instruction to avoid the competitiveness it might trigger. Esra, an experienced parent and educator whose children have attended schools of various types, emphasizes that avoiding comparison was one of her main criteria when choosing a preschool:

> I visited a few preschools and quickly realized they just weren't for us. For me, comparison is a big red flag. If a school compares kids, that's an immediate no for me. First comparison, then reward systems—

> those are two things I absolutely don't want my children to face. (Esra, 37, parent, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

In the end, Esra did enroll her children in a PRA course during the kindergarten year, relying on the presence of a trusted teacher. During this and earlier stages, she actively sought schools where children wouldn't be compared to each other or feel separated based on reward-driven distinctions.

In addition to criteria and evaluation, an approach that prioritizes children's psychological well-being considers aspects such as the teacher-student relationship and the teacher's method of instruction, i.e., matters that can be considered under the *social base* element of framing. The social base is reflected in the teacher's communication style, including their manner of speaking, level of directiveness, and the degree of autonomy granted to the children. Namely, whether they raise their tone of voice, how directive they are, and to what extent they empower children to make their own choices. When parents evaluate early childhood education more broadly, these elements, shaped by a teacher's communication skills, carry significant weight. This is particularly sensitive in early childhood, as children are not yet school-aged. Many informants, for instance, describe their ideal preschool teacher using the term compassionate. Meltem puts it this way: "They really need to be compassionate. That's honestly so important, because this is the first step a child takes into the world" (Meltem, 34, parent, private preschool). Similarly, Melek says: "It's really important to me that they're warm and compassionate" (Melek, 34, parent, private preschool). And Gülay emphasizes: "They should truly love their job and love children. They should be kind and attentive. Of course, each child may need something different, but that compassion is what really matters." (Gülay, 40, parent, private preschool). Dilek, another parent, compares two types of teachers she encountered, based on their use of language:

> First of all, they need to be compassionate. When there's constant negativity—like always saying 'don't do that'—kids find that really off-putting. I once saw that with a teacher, and by the end of the week, she had already left. I didn't like how she'd say things like 'we don't do this' instead of phrasing it more positively. But my child's current teacher—we love her. I really like teachers who speak calmly and kind of in a

> 'child's language.' You know, some teachers speak more playfully, almost like the kids. I love that. When they kneel down to talk at eye level—it's not from above. That really matters to me. (Dilek, 29, parent, private preschool)

Using a calm tone and interacting without a rigid hierarchy contributes to a more weakly framed educational experience. School administrators who are mindful of this also prioritize such characteristics when hiring teachers. For instance, Mehtap, when evaluating candidates, states: "We look for someone who genuinely loves children, is patient and compassionate. Even the way they raise their voice becomes an important factor [as a drawback]" (Mehtap, 32, manager, private preschool). Similarly, Cansu, a Waldorf preschool director, describes how closely they pay attention to teachers' communication styles:

> They really have to be loving and compassionate. That's actually the only thing we're looking for. And during interviews, we pay attention to things like voice tone—how loud are they? We prefer soft, lower-volume, calm voices. Because you're working with very young kids, and they're super sensitive to sound. Especially between ages 0–4, they get unsettled even if you raise your voice just to be heard. So we're very careful about that. Of course, formal training is valuable—but this kind of practical behavior is just as essential for us. (Cansu, 39, manager, private preschool)

Clearly, beyond having a diploma, a teacher's ability to implement pedagogical knowledge significantly affects their relationships with children and the overall classroom atmosphere. Unsurprisingly, there are also negative examples in the field. For example, Esra recounts her experience at a private preschool where a classroom activity was shared as a silent video that seemed positive at first glance. However, after she realized that the teacher had been yelling instructions the entire time, she described it as "a serious trauma for me," and withdrew her child from the school. Similarly, Emine shares her disappointment upon observing a preschool with a spacious outdoor area. Although it seemed ideal for unstructured play, she noticed children being constantly directed and posed by teachers for photos, and the play environment was dominated by raised voices. As another case, Bahar talks about a teacher she

observed while staying in the classroom during her child's school adjustment period:

> They had hired this girl as a teacher who couldn't even get down to the children's level—she was just so off-putting. Totally incompetent. Maybe she was extra tense because I was in the room, I don't know. But she showed so many unprofessional behaviors right in front of me. If I were a child, I would've wanted to leave. When I left the classroom, I told the principal: 'This school was described to me very differently. What you're doing here is more like a Qur'an course. It's so boring. This teacher is really dull. She can't even communicate with the kids.' (Bahar, 34, parent, municipality day care center)

For this reason, it is believed that a more peaceful preschool environment, free of forceful instruction, constant directives, and authoritarian tones, can be fostered through a playful and fun, love-based approach that meets children at their own level.

This rising emphasis on weak framing can also be seen in religious instruction. The idea of making religious learning enjoyable and pressure-free is frequently highlighted by educators and parents alike. For example, Feyza, who provides religious education to children of demanding parents at her private Şebboy Kindergarten, emphasizes a love-based process over achievement-driven outcomes. She explains that while they introduce Qur'anic letters, their goal is not to have children begin reading the Qur'an, but rather to nurture affection for the holy book and religious values.

In line with this, Büşra illustrates a pedagogically sensitive and affection-based approach to early religious education that prioritizes emotional engagement with religious values, practices, and places. She describes how she nurtures a love for God in children's hearts by expressing gratitude for simple blessings, like the fruit they enjoyed that day. Rather than instructing children to perform religious practices, she models them herself. She might pray in front of the children, but never tells them to join; they are free to participate if they wish or continue their activity if not. She reads the Qur'an aloud while they engage in free play, allowing their ears to become familiar with its sound. She encourages the children to run and play in the nearby mosque courtyard,

hoping they will form joyful memories of the place, so they will feel comfortable continuing to come there later in life. She emphasizes that the goal at this stage, ages 4 to 6, is to build fondness and curiosity, not mastery or doctrinal knowledge.

In another case, Sevgi, who works at a PRA-affiliated Qur'an course in a neighborhood of Üsküdar with a B-level SES score, explains that they integrate early childhood education with religious values education, emphasizing that their primary goal is to instill love for these teachings:

> Since we provide both preschool education and religious values education, we implement them together. Our aim here is to guide children toward bliss in both this world and the hereafter. We focus on cognitive development through the preschool curriculum, while teaching religious and moral values through the Qur'an, the Sunnah, hadiths, and *Esma al-Husna* [the Names of God]. The goal of the PRA curriculum is really to foster love in children. After all, 4-6-year-olds are not religiously accountable yet. What we try to do is build a foundation for them. The rest is up to the families. We don't know how they'll turn out in the future, or what kind of direction they'll take. But as early childhood educators—it seems that our category is no longer Qur'an course instructors—we aim to provide children with the foundations of religious and moral education and make them love. (Sevgi, 27, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

This quote highlights the role of 4–6 age Qur'an courses under the PRA as integrated components of the ECEC field. In line with this observation, Ertem (2022) characterizes these institutions not merely as out-of-field courses but as "Islamic kindergartens," demonstrating how they function as an alternative preschool education model that runs parallel to the official MoNE system. While this parallel structure raises concerns, Sevgi's self-identification as a preschool teacher suggests a growing professional awareness that includes attention to children's cognitive and pedagogical development. Sevgi's story also reflects her sensitivity and commitment to ensuring that religious education is delivered in a pedagogically appropriate way. She worked to have the lower floor of a newly built mosque, established by a foundation affiliated with the

D Community[2], allocated for children's Qur'an courses. She furnished the classrooms with materials and furniture no longer in use at the highly-priced private Bostan School, affiliated to the same foundation, and arranged for the renovation to be carried out by acquaintances from the foundation. As a result, the course was ready within three months, half the time such work would normally take. When I visited the course, Sevgi mentioned that she would soon be hosting one of the parent seminars she had taken the initiative to organize, since the PRA itself does not normally provide such programs. Noticing this gap, she invited a psychological counselor from Bostan School, as her own course lacked such expertise. The seminar, titled "Play in the Child's World," began with the quotation, "Birds fly, fish swim, children play," and explained to parents how children express themselves, solve problems, and learn through play. Only about 15 of the 54 parents attended, which deeply disappointed Sevgi, as she placed great importance on these seminars for raising parental awareness and had devoted significant effort to organizing them. In her quotation above, she emphasizes the school's role as a supportive rather than primary agent in value transmission, underscoring the continued centrality of the family's habitus in shaping children's religious identity. Still, she actively seeks to provide mothers with the pedagogical understanding needed to sustain and reinforce this education at home.

Returning to the love-based approach, parents also emphasize this sensitivity both in general education and in the transmission of religious values. For example, Sevde expresses that they want to ensure religious education is not given by "dragging" children along. She notes that in the school they eventually chose, the room where religious education takes place is even referred to as the "love room."

A conversation among parents from a religious private school during the focus group reflects both the external judgments surrounding early religious

[2] D Community refers to a Sufi-oriented Sunni Muslim religious group in Türkiye, tracing its roots to an influential sheikh of the Ottoman period and revitalized in the second half of the 20th century. The community places strong emphasis on spiritual guidance, charitable activities, and educational initiatives. In addition to Qur'an courses and dormitories, in recent years it has expanded into formal education, through private school complexes including kindergartens.

education and how it is taught differently in their school compared to more rigid community-based courses:

> Participant 1: Our kids go swimming at a secular foundation because the schedule works for us. That place is totally the opposite of us, as you know. One day, right after swimming, they were getting dressed and suddenly started reciting a surah—Tebbet Yeda. [Laughter] I said, "Shhh, you're going to get us stoned!" A couple of parents overheard and were totally shocked. I was like, "Quiet! You're about to revive *irtica* [idealizing backward order]!"
>
> Participant 2: Same with us. Sometimes it just pops into their heads, and they start reciting out loud while walking down the street.
>
> Participant 3: Some people look and smile, but some are so wild, looking as if they're thinking, "Are they seriously teaching them this at that age?"
>
> Participant 1: But our school doesn't do it in an intense or harsh way. They teach it in moderation—just the right amount.
>
> Participant 2: Yeah, and now they know their way around. They're teaching it with enjoyment, through stories. It's not like those *sıbyan mektebi* (old-style religious schools) at all. (Focus group, avg. 40, parents, private preschool)

Participant 1's anecdote, which she herself recounted in a humorous tone, also reveals an underlying social anxiety about being judged by secular segments of society as backward or fundamentalist. In response to such perceptions, they emphasize the pedagogical appropriateness of their children's school, an example of weak framing, distinguishing it from more traditional or rigid religious institutions, characterized by strong framing.

Among my interviewees, the most distinct profile in terms of background also displayed a different approach to framing. Cemile, whose family's religious sensitivities limited her schooling to the secondary level, married at an early age and is now the mother of five children. Her husband works in a corporate institution, and the family resides in a housing complex for religiously

observant families located within a predominantly secular neighborhood. They prefer their children's primary school teachers to be male, in order to make it easier for the father to communicate with them. Cemile declined to appear on video during our online interview. She sends her youngest child to a PRA 4–6 age course in a different neighborhood, since the course in their own secular area was closed due to insufficient demand. Cemile emphasized that, in preschool education, religious instruction is the primary concern for her family. She explained that she encourages her children to learn to read the Qur'an correctly and to complete a *hatim*. This orientation illustrates her support for a rigid framing approach, one that demands an intensive educational process from the child in order to achieve these goals. Cemile's case, considering her limited institutionalized cultural capital, serves as a reverse confirmation of the proposition that greater cultural capital is associated with weaker framing (Cemile, 35, parent, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course).

Parental pedagogical perspective is shaped not only by education-based cultural capital but also by the evolving structure of the broader cultural field, where public discourse increasingly highlights children's psychological and developmental vulnerability. The account of Hatice, who possesses relatively less cultural capital, like Cemile, is significant in this manner. Unlike the other informants, Hatice left formal education after secondary school for religious reasons and later completed high school and a two-year college degree in Islamic Theology via open education. She lives in a neighborhood with a B SES score and has a preschool-aged daughter. She supports early Qur'an education and memorization, and has chosen a school that, in her words, offers "a bit more religious education compared to normal preschools" (Hatice, 34, parent 4-6-year-old Qur'an course). Still, she emphasizes that even in this school, the religious instruction is given in a loving manner. Her own childhood experience of learning religious values provides a striking contrast to current practices:

> There's definitely been a huge change. I even criticize myself on this point. My father taught me, and he was an extremely disciplined person. So, I was really programmed in that way. Now I catch myself using the same strictness, and it really bothers me—I try to stop myself. My father taught me with such a rigid, almost authoritarian manner, like

> an old-school Qur'an teacher. And not just with reading the Qur'an, but also memorizing it. We'd sit together, pray in congregation, and he'd make me memorize everything orally. That might be better—maybe it's a dream for some people. But it wasn't like that for me while I was learning it. Today I'm very grateful, and I thank my father, but at the time, it wasn't easy. It could've been a lot gentler. It was very strict. But now it's not like that anymore—now it's more about making kids love it. And why? Because today's kids question everything. I don't remember questioning much back then, but now they question, and honestly, it's hard to keep up. There's nothing left but to teach with love." (Hatice, 34, parent, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

This quote illustrates a generational shift in how religious education is approached, shaped by both changing pedagogical norms and children's evolving dispositions. Although Hatice is grateful in a sense for having learned these values ultimately, she critically reflects on the emotionally challenging and rigid methods of religious instruction used in her own upbringing. Her current awareness stems not only from her personal experiences and reflections on her emotional state during childhood, but also from other forms of cultural capital she has acquired, such as reading books on child development after becoming a mother and following experts on social media. For instance, she expresses concerns about the use of reward-based methods in her daughter's religious education. Similarly, İlknur, while evaluating the parents of the Qur'an course where she works, notes that they are more educated compared to previous years, not necessarily in terms of formal education, but in how they have educated themselves. She explains that even if they are not university graduates, they frequently follow child development experts on social media, read relevant books, and tell her they do activities and experiments at home to support their children's development.

The second point that Hatice draws attention to in the quote above about the nature of the new generation of children is also important. She observes that today's children are more questioning and critical, and they are less likely to comply with authority unless they are genuinely persuaded. In fact, it implies that it is only through love and persuasion that values can be effectively cultivated at this time. Therefore, beyond pedagogical concerns, this also

relates to the effectiveness of value transmission. The account shared by Büşra offers a compelling example of this approach. She reflects on the long-term outcomes of the children she taught the Arabic letters and foundational religious knowledge when the 4–6-year-old Qur'an courses under the PRA were first launched in 2013. Now in high school, those students still remember their early education fondly and stay in touch with her. What matters most to her is that they continue to read the Qur'an in their daily lives. In contrast, she shares a negative example from someone she knows who attended a religious course run by the L Community during childhood. That person's experience, she suggests, lacked the same positive and lasting impact:

> She was sent to a course run by the L Community, and she doesn't read the Qur'an at all now—because they pushed her way too hard back then. They made her finish a whole *hatim*. Now she won't even touch it. I asked her once, "How did you even finish it?" and she told me, "While my friends were doing coloring or playing, one of the teachers would pull me into a room and have me read Qur'an the whole time. I was so bored." And now? Nothing. She's going to an *Imam-Hatip* high school, but she still doesn't read. It's really sad—how it affects a kid mentally. But families don't realize it at the time. I still remember the big ceremony they held when she finished the hatim, and the gifts they gave, and all. But the real issue is what happens later on. (Büşra, 42, teacher, 4-6-year-old Qur'an course)

Therefore, keeping the framing weak, by carefully considering the selection, sequencing, pacing, criteria, and social base, also serves to prevent the negative outcomes that may result from coercive instruction backfiring. In other words, the acquisition of greater cultural capital, accompanied by a child-centered pedagogical perspective, reshapes approaches to early religious education. At the same time, the contemporary requirements for effective early value transmission are best met through this weakly framed, child-centered approach. A doxic sphere like religion, when intersecting with the ECEC field, is transformed through the framing created by parents and educators, through the content they include, exclude, or postpone, and the methods they adapt according to children's general and specific developmental conditions. Since

the very practice in question here consists of value transmission, complete elimination of reproduction is not the case; however, the fact that increased cultural capital leads to transformation is still highly significant.

§ 6.4 Conclusion

The field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) appeared through the data presented in this chapter as a site for the reproduction of religious habitus. For families with a religious habitus, the early years of education are viewed as critical for instilling values aligned with their way of life. While religious habitus is not monolithic, what unites many of these parents is a shared concern about mis-cultivation, the risk that their children may internalize values contrary to their own. This fear drives a strong desire to protect their lifestyle through the educational settings they select or build.

The chapter has illustrated a spectrum of approaches: parents who can afford private religious schools to ensure early religious education aligned with their worldview; actors who, unsatisfied with existing options, establish their own institutions; and families with fewer resources who rely on the PRA-affiliated Qur'an courses. These PRA programs offer a more accessible alternative while remaining under state inspection, thereby helping families avoid religious community-led courses perceived as pedagogically or ideologically risky. This institutional positioning reveals how broader structural dynamics, including class, regulation, and accessibility, shape religious education pathways.

The content of early value education is also shaped by intersecting political dynamics. In Türkiye, the ability to teach religious values at an early age has historically been constrained by political power balances. During periods of strict secularism, religious education was forbidden before age 12 and had to be provided covertly, often under the risk of inspection. However, as political power consolidated under a religiously oriented party, legal and institutional changes enabled earlier religious instruction. This included the incorporation of religious content into public kindergartens, often initiated by individual teachers or implemented through MoNE-PRA protocols with parental consent.

Yet this transformation is not without contestation. Secular and Atatürkist segments of society voice concern over the legitimization of early religious instruction in public spaces. Simultaneously, these groups work to transmit their own identity-based cultural capital, such as Atatürkist values, through ECEC as well. Ultimately, the dominant values reproduced in early education shift in accordance with the power dynamics in the political field. As Williams (1973) argues through the concept of selective tradition, it is those with power who determine which values are institutionalized and transmitted. This applies not only to curriculum content but also to branch courses on art and music and to the inclusion of discussing contemporary events, so long as they align with the accepted norms of the prevailing community, in this case, the religiously oriented one.

To understand how religious education-oriented ECEC institutions construct their curricula, it is meaningful to examine how they negotiate other value systems, particularly the official curriculum's Atatürkist content. Using Bernstein's concept of classification, I reached out to three patterns that emerged in the Turkish context: (1) avoidant/selective engagement, referring to strictly avoiding any official content or selecting certain parts aligning with community values (2) reluctant incorporation, implying that incorporate Atatürkist content but out of necessity and (3) embracing integration, signifying willingly acceptance of Atatürkist values. These illustrate varying degrees of boundary protection or adaptation, forming a continuum from strong to weak classification.

Beyond content, the chapter has explored how the style of religious value transmission is shaped by agents' cultural capital, especially when viewed through Bernstein's second tool: framing. The selection of content, what parts of religious belief are included; sequencing, when they are introduced; pacing, how quickly children are expected to progress; criteria, how they are assessed; and social base, the teacher's communication style and relational stance, all reveal pedagogical approaches from different angles. The data showed that framing in each category weakened when cultural capital increased. This shift aligns with Bernstein's prediction that social change is possible when framing weakens and with the assertion that Bourdieu's doxic structures can be

contested in times of crisis, changing the power field, and particularly when agents acquire more sources of capital, here, cultural capital.

Thus, while ECEC remains a key site for the reproduction of religious identity and values, it also emerges as a potential scene for pedagogical transformation. This chapter has demonstrated how those with higher levels of cultural capital among families and educators with a religious habitus, who are not a homogeneous group in their approach to early religious instruction, tend to exhibit more pedagogically informed preferences. Their increasing awareness influences how, when, and under what conditions they find it appropriate to introduce religious content to children. This shift reveals how internal differentiation within religious communities is shaped by access to cultural resources, such as formal education or exposure to evolving discourses on child development. As such, the ECEC field illustrates not only the reproduction of certain value systems but also the subtle reconfigurations that occur as agents respond to changing social, political, and cultural conditions.

7

Conclusion

Le capitaine Jonathan,
Étant âgé de dix-huit ans,
Capture un jour un pélican
Dans une île d'Extrême-Orient.
Le pélican de Jonathan,
Au matin, pond un œuf tout blanc
Et il en sort un pélican
Lui ressemblant étonnamment.
Et ce deuxième pélican
Pond, à son tour, un œuf tout blanc
D'où sort, inévitablement,
Un autre qui en fait autant.
Cela peut durer très longtemps
Si l'on ne fait pas d'omelette avant..

– Robert Desnos, *Chantefleurs, Chantefables*

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) open their seminal work *La Reproduction* with an epigraph drawn from a children's poem by Robert Desnos. In the poem, a pelican lays a white egg, from which another identical pelican hatches, who then lays a white egg in turn, and so the cycle

continues for a long time.[1] This simple and concrete verse offers a vivid metaphor for social reproduction. Considering that Bourdieu is often seen as placing greater emphasis on reproduction than on change, the omelet scene that breaks the cycle is particularly striking. His theory of cultural and social reproduction offers a powerful framework for understanding how schools, and educational institutions more broadly, contribute to the reproduction of class structure. For him, reproduction involves more than the intergenerational transmission of resources or cultural knowledge; it entails the persistence of the very structure of power relations within society. In other words, what is reproduced is not only the egg, but also the belief that laying eggs in this particular way is legitimate and natural. This "misrecognition" of arbitrary social arrangements as necessary or neutral is central to how symbolic domination operates. What breaks the cycle then? The metaphor of the omelet can be commented as an external intervention changing the balance of power, such as a political crisis (Cottino, 1973). Bourdieu acknowledges the potential for change in moments of mismatch between habitus and field. However, it remains debatable whether the new strategies of individuals, when confronted with social conditions (field) that do not fully align with their dispositions, shaped by past experiences (habitus), are still, in some way, constrained by the habitus itself. Nevertheless, his sociological tools are helpful for analyzing and illuminating such processes (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

The habitus can be thought of as a fabric woven from the threads of various fields, one that "integrates past experiences and functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 83). When these threads are consistently provided, the habitus, along with the types of capital obtained within and the symbolic meanings attached to capital, are also reproduced. But when threads are added or altered, they allow for the possibility of a transformed texture. In this dissertation, I have examined

[1] *Kaptan Jonathan,/On sekiz yaşındaydı o an,/Bulduğunda bir gün bir pelikan,/Bir adada Uzak Doğu'dan./Jonathan'ın pelikan,/Bir sabah beyaz bir yumurta yumurtladı ta taam./Tabi içinden çıktı bir pelikan,/Ona benziyordu tastamam./Ve bu ikinci pelikan,/O da beyaz bir yumurta yumurtladı sırası gediği an./Yine çıktı içinden kaçınılmazlıktan,/Bir başkası aynı şeyi yapan./Bu böyle sürer işte uzun zaman,/Biri yapmazsa önce omlet tavadan.* (Turkish translation by the author.)

how cultural capital, particularly educational attainment and competencies shaped within the cultural field, acts as a significant thread within the habitus fabric of mothers with middle-class practices and religious identities, and how it serves both reproduction and transformation in different ways, with a focus on their preschool choices. In this concluding chapter, I will first evaluate the ECEC field through Bourdieu's concept of *field* with his suggested steps. I will then summarize how the practice of school selection is carried out by religiously observant mothers with middle-class practices. Finally, I will conclude the dissertation by advancing the argument that cultural capital, shaped by both educational attainment and cultural taste, can lead not only to social reproduction (in terms of social class) but also to social transformation (in relation to religious habitus).

This dissertation has examined the complex social site of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and asserts it as a Bourdieusian *field* in Türkiye where classed and religious dynamics intersect and are reproduced. Through an ethnographic and relational lens, it explored how middle-class religious families navigate the fragmented institutional landscape of ECEC, making sense of and engaging with available options in ways that reflect both their aspirations and constraints. After offering a thick description of the site through data in the previous chapters, revisiting Bourdieu's proposed framework for field analysis here serves as an analytical verification. In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Bourdieu (1992) outlines three necessary steps for conducting a field analysis: to reveal "the position of the field vis-à-vis the field of power, […] to map out the objective structure of the relations between the positions occupied by the agents or institutions, […] and to analyze the habitus of agents, the different systems of dispositions they have acquired by internalizing a determinate type of social and economic condition" (pp. 104–105).

First, the relationship of the ECEC field to other categorical or institutional fields indicates its position vis-à-vis the field of power. In relation to the cultural field, and more specifically the educational field, the ECEC field, encompassing early childhood, has gained increasing significance. Scientific research on the long-term impact of psychological and developmental interventions during the 0–6 age period has contributed to the growing importance of the ECEC field within the scientific domain. The specificity of this field is also

closely linked to the historical construction of childhood. Whereas in the premodern era, children were seen as miniature adults, in the modern period, they began to be recognized as a distinct category, "children" (Aries, 1962), leading to the development of pedagogies tailored specifically to this life stage. Child-centered education models, developed first in Western countries, were later exported to developing countries from the 1980s onward, supported by international organizations (Shah, 2019). The rate of preschool enrollment has also become a criterion by which such organizations evaluate countries. Moreover, ECEC does not fall solely under the educational field; the domain of care is equally determinative. With the increasing importance of women's participation in the labor force, the responsibility for child care, previously placed entirely on modern women, has increasingly shifted to institutions. As a result, gendered employment structures intersect with and shape the dynamics of the ECEC field.

In the context of Türkiye, the ECEC field remained a low-priority policy area until the early 2000s, with political discourse often failing to translate into concrete policy frameworks or institutional advancement (Akkan et al., 2023). Over the last two decades, Türkiye has made notable progress in expanding preschool classroom capacity, resulting in a nearly threefold rise in enrollment among 3–5-year-olds (Gol-Guven, 2018). However, this growth has been concentrated primarily in nursery classes for 5-year-old children, a more accessible expansion goal, as these classes are often established within existing primary school buildings (Akkan et al., 2023). At the same time, rising emphasis on women's employment and early childhood development has led to growing demand for ECEC services. The ability to meet this demand depends largely on the extent to which political authorities prioritize ECEC on their policy agenda. The state's investment in this area of social policy can be evaluated through various indicators: the number of public preschools established, the university quotas for preschool teacher training programs, the number of teachers appointed to public positions, and the amount of financial and supportive resources (such as psychological counseling) allocated to schools. For example, in my fieldwork, I interviewed preschool teachers working in both private and public institutions, and they shared that their school administrations often failed to take this level of education seriously. Even when

administrators rhetorically emphasized the importance of early childhood education, they frequently neglected to provide adequate resources in practice. For instance, it is common for affiliated public nursery classes located within higher-level school facilities to receive insufficient support from the school's psychological counselling services. Furthermore, the extent to which private institutions have come to dominate the field is not politically neutral. Until about a decade ago, the ECEC field was a relatively marginal and dominated part of the broader educational field. Yet it is likely to gain increasing importance and symbolic power, in Bourdieu's terms, in the years ahead. The inclusion of early childhood education in political party platforms and the growing activities of local governments in this area, even to the point of obstructing one another's initiatives, suggest that the ECEC field has become a site of political contestation, which is also subjected to the second step of analysis.

Second, analyzing the relationship between agents and structures within the field also demonstrates the internal power dynamics of the ECEC field. The position occupied by the state and the gaps left open to the market reflect an uneven distribution between public and private provision. Publicly funded early childhood education remains limited in both capacity and accessibility, while private institutions, targeted at families who can afford them, often offer services with broader age coverage and longer care hours, thereby appearing more privileged. However, the field is far from a simple public–private divide that can be directly equated with a low–high quality distinction; in reality, the relationship between institutional type and educational quality is far more complex and variable. As one reason, private schools are not standardized. There are mid-level private institutions that fill the gap left by the state in terms of age coverage and care hours, schools often chosen out of necessity by working families, which may not feel pressure to improve quality. In contrast, more expensive private schools are expected to offer better education and personalized care. Yet in practice, teachers at such institutions are often less qualified than their public-school counterparts, including those holding two-year associate degrees or vocational high school diplomas in child development. They also tend to earn lower salaries, which may negatively impact job satisfaction. I encountered private schools in the field that adopt pedagogical approaches

and prioritize teacher well-being and fair remuneration. However, it is more common to find cases where educational institutions have been commercialized and operate as profit-driven businesses, without providing decent conditions for teachers, as seen in the recent case of private school teachers' protests (BBC News Türkçe, 2024; Kılınç, 2025). While a child attending a private school may gain a symbolically advantageous position through the service they receive, a teacher working at the same school may find themselves at a disadvantage compared to a public school teacher in terms of labor conditions and status. It is also important to note that although private institutions may have better physical infrastructure and more favorable student–teacher ratios, there is no consistent correlation between longer care hours and children's well-being (Göl-Güven, 2024).

Similarly, public schools themselves are internally diverse. While some public schools struggle because underperforming teachers cannot easily be dismissed due to civil servant protections, others gain a strong reputation thanks to the presence of well-known and respected teachers. Not only teacher profiles, but also the socioeconomic status of the school's neighborhood contribute to its perceived quality. For instance, public preschools in high-SES areas are often seen as better schools due to their student profiles. Independent preschools, which offer full-day service through extracurricular club activities, become a competitive option for families with the financial means to pay higher fees than regular public schools and the cultural and social capital to navigate registration processes and admission conditions.

Another issue in the public provision of ECEC is the institutional fragmentation between governing bodies. Ministries and municipalities, affiliated with different political parties, are in competition. This was evident in the case of the Republican People's Party (RPP), which made expanding preschool access a central campaign promise. After winning the Istanbul mayoralty from the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in the 2019 local elections, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) opened more than 100 new day care centers. In 2024, these were targeted for closure on the grounds that they provided kindergarten-level education without being legally affiliated with the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). In addition to this institutional competition, the role of the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) is particularly

notable. Since 2013, the PRA has expanded its services in the ECEC space by offering religious education and care for children aged 4–6. This has created a site of conflict around educational content. Whereas early religious education had been restricted by previous governments, shifts in political power enabled JDP, as an Islamic-oriented political party, to circumvent MoNE and establish early childhood religious education under a different state institution. Unlike the IMM, however, the lack of MoNE oversight for PRA courses has never been raised as a problem by the government, illustrating the asymmetry and political bias in how institutional legitimacy is enforced. This demonstrates how the ECEC field in Türkiye is closely intertwined with political struggles and shifts in the field of power.

Third, the analysis of agents' habitus, their internalized socio-economic and cultural conditions, constitutes the final step of field analysis in Bourdieu's framework. In this study, the agents consist mostly of religious, university-educated, middle-income mothers living in Istanbul. In Chapter 5, I examined these mothers' social class, and in Chapter 6, their religious habitus. I showed that their preschool choices are shaped by both the structure of the field and their habitus. By emphasizing this relational dynamic, I also argued that these practices not only reflect but also contribute to the reproduction and transformation of the field in specific ways.

Figure 7.1 illustrates the positioning of the agent's, i.e., mother's, school choice practice within the ECEC field in relation to their habitus, drawing on Bourdieu's relational sociology. At the center of the diagram is the agent, whose actions are shaped within a structured ECEC field with the available options in a mixed economy, provided by both public and private institutions. These services are also constrained by the institution's curricular content, which Bernstein refers to as its *classification*, and by its pedagogical style, or *framing*. These can be considered external elements shaping the practice of school choice. The internal dimension, on the other hand, is the mother's habitus, and more specifically, the most critical element shaping that habitus: cultural capital.

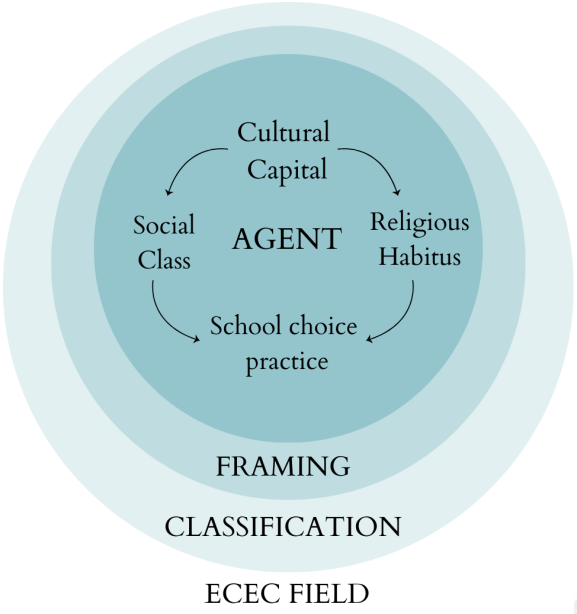


Figure 7.1 The positioning of the agent within the ECEC field.
SOURCE: *Created by the author, inspired by* (Byrne & Devine, 2017).

Looking first at the social class dimension, mothers who possess cultural capital, such as higher education and refined cultural taste, tend to exhibit middle-class practices when selecting a preschool for their child. As demonstrated in Chapter 5 through field data, these practices begin with the mother's embodied sense of anxiety, continue with classed preferences and acts of distinction (e.g., distancing the child from environments she deems inappropriate), and are reflected in the development of strategic responses when economic resources fall short of matching her cultural preferences. These agents embody a form of anxious mothering in which the responsibility of child care is placed squarely on their shoulders. They are often deprived of traditional support systems such as extended family or neighborhood networks, particularly in the context of urban life. Equipped with higher education and increasingly exposed to popularized pedagogical discourses, these mothers are concerned about their child's developmental and socialization needs, especially from age three onwards, and often feel they cannot meet those needs alone. At the same time, they wish to return to professional or social life, and thus feel the weight of caregiving responsibilities more acutely. Yet, even as they consider preschool enrollment, they may experience internal guilt or anticipate criticism

from their social circle. Once they become convinced of the need to enroll their child, they take on the role of demander of ECEC services. However, this opens up a new layer of concern: what kind of school is the right one? Mothers with a certain level of economic means and cultural taste also hold higher expectations. In this game of "finding the appropriate school," those who understand the rules of the game and know how to strategically mobilize their cards, namely capital, are more likely to succeed in securing what they see as the best option.

When selecting among private schools, these mothers place high importance on several criteria, such as the educational philosophy applied in the classroom, the use of natural furniture and materials, the absence of processed foods in school meals, opportunities for engagement with nature, and a child-centered pedagogical approach. In order to even make such preferences, parents must first possess a certain level of knowledge and awareness about these issues. Their ability to identify a school that aligns with their expectations often depends on trusted recommendations from others who have already been satisfied with the institution, which in turn requires access to social capital and networks. Or they use their resources to research, visit, and evaluate schools.

Once such a private school is identified, the primary concern becomes whether they can carry the financial burden of enrollment. When there is a mismatch between their cultural aspirations and economic means, they experience what I term the *entrapment of the middle class*. This is not a state of absolute deprivation, but rather a sense of being constrained, caused by having aspirations that stretch beyond their financial flexibility. To cope with this tension, parents develop a range of strategies: they may take advantage of early registration discounts, annual payment schemes, sibling or alumni discounts, or receive financial support from their own parents. Others reorganize their household budgets by making deliberate financial sacrifices to prioritize early education expenses.

When they identify a public preschool that meets their standards, such as one with a well-regarded teacher, a spacious playground, and a location in a reputable neighborhood, they may choose to move their residence to fall within the catchment area or, in some cases, use the address of a relative or acquaintance. They monitor enrollment periods closely and, if necessary,

register their child a year in advance. In public schools that rely on parental donations due to limited state budgets, these parents are often able and willing to pay the requested fees, amounts that are unaffordable for lower-income families but still significantly lower than private school tuition. Throughout the school year, they remain actively involved in their child's educational experience.

When mothers succeed in securing a school that aligns with their expectations, whether through pedagogical approach, teacher profile, school environment, or neighborhood, they feel privileged by that choice and often perceive themselves as entitled to such quality. The effect of these classed resources, expectations, distinctions, and strategies on final preschool selection is highly significant. Similar dynamics are also observable among secular families with comparable levels of education and cultural taste. However, religious families often carry an additional layer of concern: ensuring that the school provides religious education or that its curriculum aligns with their values. For secular families, on the other hand, concerns about their children being exposed to religious instruction may equally shape their choices.

Returning to Figure 7.1, this study also shows that parents' preschool choices are shaped by goals of value transmission associated with their habitus. Since the majority of my informants possess a religious habitus, this transmission takes the form of passing on religious values and religious identity. Religion is approached here as a component of culture. Unlike ethnic identity, which is often assigned rather than chosen, religious identity can, in some contexts, be the result of individual decision. Nevertheless, it is typically constructed and maintained through the everyday practices of religious values within a specific habitus and their intergenerational transmission. Since religious identity represents a form of belief and lifestyle within the cultural field, I conceptualize it as a form of horizontal cultural capital, distinct from vertical cultural capital, which I associate here with institutional levels of education and which more directly produces symbolic distinctions. In fact, depending on the rules of the field and the positioning of both agents and institutions, religious capital may also become symbolically advantageous or disadvantageous, and may serve as either a target or vehicle of symbolic violence, whether as dominant or dominated. Such a context allows for a social analysis based

on levels of religious capital. In this dissertation, however, I do not attempt to measure levels of religiosity. I do not evaluate informants based on the depth of their religious knowledge or the degree to which they adhere to religious practices. Instead, I define them based on their possession of a religious habitus, not religious capital per se.

The participating mothers are Sunni Muslim women living in Istanbul, and for many, the cultivation of religious values in their children is of vital importance. Their preschool preferences often include schools where children are exposed to basic Islamic teachings, where a familiar language that includes religious terms is used, where teachers and fellow parents dress similarly to themselves, and where children can become familiar with religious spaces such as mosques. It is also a concern among some schools and parents that art and music classes should be compatible with their religious habitus. The belief that this cultivation must begin at an early age is frequently emphasized. Otherwise, they fear the child may be exposed to mis-cultivation, the internalization of values and practices that do not align with their own. When confronted with school settings that conflict with their habitus, such as those that actively celebrate New Year's events, parents tend to find such environments challenging. In these cases, they may either supplement their child's education with extracurricular religious instruction or choose a school that provides religious education, even if they are dissatisfied with other aspects of the institution. For socioeconomically disadvantaged families, the 4–6-year-old Qur'an courses offered by the Presidency of Religious Affairs (PRA) serve as an accessible alternative for fulfilling this religious educational demand and can be preferred over regular public kindergartens.

However, it is important to note that a shared set of religious sensitivities, such as visible religious practices in everyday life (e.g., wearing the headscarf) or a common desire for children to receive religious education, does not equate to a monolithic religious habitus or an absolute way of religious education. The other "threads" woven into the fabric of these mothers' habitus, such as cultural and economic capital, diversify the texture significantly. For example, the social group with middle-class practices, while sending their children to private religious schools that meet their aesthetic and pedagogical expectations, may differentiate itself from courses under the PRA or religious

communities. This distinction illustrates that even within a shared religious field, class stratification continues to structure access, experience, and educational pathways.

In addition, the engagement of parents and educators with religious habitus in the political field also varies, indicating intra-habitus diversities. The content of educational activities is closely tied to the dominant power within a given context (Apple, 2019; Williams, 1973). In Türkiye, religious education has historically been subject to various forms of restriction, including outright bans, limitations on content, and age-based regulations. However, with the rise to power of an Islamist political party and the consolidation of authoritarian rule, religious education has become more accessible, and, according to some critics, even imposed (AÇEV & ERG, 2021). For example, the replacement of the eight-year primary education system, which was initially established to close religious secondary schools, with a 4+4+4 system, and thereby raising the number of religion-based schools at the secondary level, is currently being debated in terms of the increasing religious nature of education (Ertem, 2024). In this context, I focus on the concerns and preferences of religious families, which reflect their reaction to the changes in the political field, and also their interaction with the cultural field, both in diversified ways.

While analyzing the differentiated structure of the religious habitus within the context of the ECEC field, I employed Bernstein's terminology, i.e., classification and framing, as it provided analytical tools to categorize this broad data set. I connected the content of education and debates on curriculum to the religious habitus–political field relationship through the concept of classification. On the other hand, I related the style of education and pedagogical debates to the religious habitus–cultural field relationship by using the concept of framing.

First, I explored the diversity of engagement that individuals with a religious habitus exhibit toward the political field by examining their varying positions on the content of education, specifically in response to the secular or Atatürkist national education curriculum. I categorized the attitudes observed among both educators and parents under three headings: *avoidant or selective engagement*, referring to those who reject the national curriculum entirely or selectively accept only the parts they consider aligned with their own values;

reluctant incorporation, where educators implement the curriculum at the request of parents despite not fully endorsing it, or parents feel being obliged to accept it simply because it is provided at the school; and *embracing integration*, referring to those who reconcile the national curriculum with their religious habitus and adopt both together willingly.

Second, intra-religious habitus diversity becomes visible within the cultural field through the distinction between those who possess high levels of cultural capital, particularly shaped by formal education and exposure to a pedagogically informed environment, and those who lack such capital, regardless of income level. The participants in this dissertation mostly belong to the first group, as university-educated mothers and religious education teachers who actively seek to enhance their pedagogical competence. Regarding course teachers working at PRA 4–6 age Qur'an courses, for instance, the official teaching qualifications are to be a graduate of the relevant middle and higher education levels, to be a *hafiz* (a person who has memorized the entire Qur'an), to pass the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS), and to complete 180 hours of training in child development. However, research participants exceeded these minimum standards. In addition to holding university degrees in theology, some have either completed or are currently pursuing degrees in child development or have enrolled in additional certification programs. These educators frequently expressed that PRA's in-service training was insufficient and shared the pedagogical challenges they face when working with young children. Their efforts to improve themselves highlight a drive for competence and sensitivity to the developmental needs of the early childhood group. Therefore, this group of educators does not represent educators in the PRA courses as a whole but rather reflects a pedagogically concerned segment of the religious habitus, distinguished primarily by their level of formal education, which constitutes the focus of this dissertation.

In order to categorically analyze the positioning of participants within early religious instruction, I employed subcategories of framing, which include: selection (what aspects of religious belief are included), sequencing (the order in which they are introduced), pacing (the degree to which the learning tempo is adapted to each child), criteria (methods of assessing children's understanding), and social base (the teacher's communicative and relational

style). Together, these dimensions reveal the pedagogical approach from multiple angles. Within this framework, weaker framing, characterized by greater flexibility and learner-centeredness, is considered more pedagogically appropriate for early childhood education. The data showed that participants with higher levels of cultural capital tended to adopt weaker framing across each category. This finding highlights the significance of cultural capital as a factor in shaping the diversified structure of both religious habitus and the transmission of religious values.

Centering the agent, the preschool choice practices of mothers, and, similarly, the service provision choices of institutional actors, are shaped by their social class position and cultural habitus, particularly religious in this context. Within the structural constraints and possibilities of the ECEC field, these choices shape the content and style of early education and care that children ultimately receive. The main arguments of the dissertation, which traces how cultural capital, shaped by education level and participation in the cultural field, interacts with social class and religious habitus, producing divergent effects. On one hand, cultural capital reinforces middle-class distinction and sustains unequal access to quality services (reproduction) in the uneven structure of service by limited public provision and privatization; on the other, it enables recognition of the child-centered pedagogical orientation within value-based agency that can shift practices and expectations (transformation) in a politically contested context in which the balance of power has been changing continuously. The ECEC field, consequently, is the scene where these dual processes emerge, at the intersection of the political and cultural fields.
This dissertation demonstrates that middle-class practices of distinction are not limited to secular families but are equally reproduced among religious segments of society. Unequal access to quality early childhood education and care is deepened by neoliberal marketization and privatization, which leave the public system under-resourced and uneven. In this gap, community-based institutions such as PRA Qur'an courses with religious instruction and RPP-run municipal day care centers following secular/Atatürkist content play increasingly central roles. Nevertheless, the binary image of religious versus secular is not absolute in education; gray positions emerge where both religious and Atatürkist content are embraced by limited families and educators. Another

convergence across social groups is found in the valorization of child-centered pedagogy, especially among families with higher cultural capital, which reshapes expectations about early education beyond ideological divides. At the same time, the ECEC field is distinctly gendered: the responsibility for young children's care remains socially coded as maternal. ECEC institutions both enable mothers to perform other social roles and identities and yet reproduce gendered norms by employing women overwhelmingly as caregivers and educators.

While this study offers a relational and field-based analysis of preschool choice practices among mothers with middle-class practices and religious habitus in Türkiye, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the research is geographically limited to Istanbul, which is a metropolitan context where early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions are diverse but have a specific structure, for instance, having a higher proportion of private preschools. The dynamics examined here, particularly the intersections of class, cultural capital, and religious identity, may differ. Another point, the study primarily focuses on a population segment with relatively high levels of formal education. Consequently, it may not capture the experiences of families with lower educational attainment or alternative configurations of cultural capital. Moreover, by focusing on this specific subset of the religious segment in Türkiye, the research does not encompass the perspectives of secular families. Future studies that include a more balanced range of participants in terms of educational background and religious-secular lifestyle could offer stronger comparative insights and a more comprehensive understanding of the field. Moreover, while the analysis addresses both parents' practices and educators, the views of policymakers, curriculum designers, and governing institutional managers are less directly included. Future research could expand the scope by more centrally including these actors, particularly to understand how macro-level political struggles are reflected in daily institutional decisions. In addition, while this study addresses the gendered position of women in carrying the responsibilities of motherhood, future research could explore whether middle-class resources, beyond mothers' own educational levels, are also gendered, particularly by examining the role of spouses. The ECEC field is female-dominated both in terms of parents and providers, yet the gender distribution

of enrolled children is relatively balanced. Nevertheless, everyday lessons and routines in ECEC settings can be evaluated in terms of whether they contribute to the reinforcement of gendered roles. To note that, although the study addresses how habitus shapes preschool choices, the research was not designed with this emphasis from the outset; the fieldwork began in a more grounded manner. If this emphasis had been established from the beginning, more in-depth questions about families' habitus could have been asked about the volume and structure of the capital that previous generations possess and activate, as Bourdieu (1984, p. 118) suggests, which would have enriched the research.

Based on the findings of this study, future research could adopt two complementary methodological approaches to better understand and expand the dynamics in the ECEC field. First, a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative data analysis with qualitative insights can strengthen the empirical basis and generalizability of findings by enabling the measurement of broader patterns and correlations. Second, a longitudinal research design would be particularly valuable for tracking how different early childhood education processes shape children's educational and social trajectories over time. Such an approach could shed light on the long-term consequences of early school choices and reveal how these processes contribute to social reproduction processes or enable forms of mobility and change.

At its core, this dissertation has shown that the earliest educational experiences of children, regarded as the most precious beings to their parents, within a historically constructed relationship, are shaped by field structures and family dynamics grounded in social class and habitus, revealing also that even the most seemingly personal choices ultimately come with a social price.

Appendix A: Informant Profile Overview.

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Profession/ Occupation	Title	Affiliated Institution	School Type	School Perspective	School Price	District Neighborhood	SES
Feyza	32	B.A.	Mathematics/ Preschool Manager	Manager	MoNE	Private	Religious	High	Eyüpsultan Göktürk Merkez	B+
Beyza	36	B.A.	Preschool Teaching/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Secular	Low	Kadıköy Fenerbahçe	A+
Gamze	35	B.A.	Preschool Teaching/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	IMM	Public	Secular	Low	Maltepe Fındıklı	C+
Melike	34	B.A.	Preschool Teaching/ Preschool Teacher	Manager	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very High	Üsküdar Kısıklı	C+
Hazal	32	B.A.	Sociology/ Graduate Student	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Üsküdar Kuzguncuk	A
Neslihan	35	Ph.D.	Psychology/ Academic	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Ümraniye Armağanevler	C+
Zehra	27	M.A.	Theology/ Qur'an Course Teacher	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Beşiktaş Sinanpaşa	A
Şerife	32	B.A.	Theology/ Qur'an Course Teacher	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Beşiktaş Sinanpaşa	A

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Profession/ Occupation	Title	Affiliated Institution	School Type	School Perspective	School Price	District Neighborhood	SES
Emine	35	High School	Housewife	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Kadıköy Erenköy	A
Sevgi	27	B.A.	Theology/ Qur'an Course Teacher	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Üsküdar Cumhuriyet	B+
Mehtap	32	B.A.	Psychology/ Preschool Manager	Manager	MoFSS	Private	Religious	High	Kartal Esentepe	B
Sevde	33	M.A.	Literature/ Graduate Student	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Religious	High	Pendik Velibaba	D
Hülya	35	M.A.	Preschool Teaching/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Religious	Low	Zeytinburnu Telsiz	E
Melek	34	M.A.	English Literature/ Translator	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Çekmeköy Merkez	B+
Meltem	34	B.A.	Food Engineering/ Housewife	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very High	Başakşehir Kayabaşı	C+
Filiz	32	B.A.	Journalism/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very High	Üsküdar Küçük Çamlıca	B+
Selma	27	B.A.	Preschool Teaching/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Secular	Medium	Kadıköy Acıbadem	A
Cansu	39	B.A.	History/ Preschool Manager	Manager	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Başakşehir Başak	B
Gülay	40	B.A.	Management/ Housewife	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very High	Üsküdar Küçük Çamlıca	B+

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Profession/ Occupation	Title	Affiliated Institution	School Type	School Perspective	School Price	District Neighborhood	SES
Nazlı	33	Ph.D.	History Of Science/ Academic	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	Very High	Çekmeköy Nişantepe	B
Özge	27	M.A.	Preschool Teaching/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Secular	Medium	Kağıthane Hamidiye	C+
Yeliz	31	B.A.	Water Sci. Engineering/ Finance Worker	Parent	IMM	Public	Secular	Low	Pendik Harmandere	C+
Halime	30	M.A.	Preschool Teaching/ Preschool Manager	Manager	MoNE	Private	Religious	High	Eyüpsultan Alibeyköy	B
Serap	45	B.A.	Child Development/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoNE	Private	Religious	High	Eyüpsultan Alibeyköy	B
Funda	39	B.A.	Art Teaching/ Preschool Manager	Manager	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Kadıköy Caferağa	A+
Leyla	40	B.A.	Preschool Teaching Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoNE	Public	Religious	Low	Bayrampaşa Orta	E
Gizem	30	B.A.	Psych. Counseling/ Housewife	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Küçükçekmece Cennet	C
Esra	37	B.A.	Science Teaching/ Science Teacher	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Küçükçekmece Cumhuriyet	C
Meral	32	B.A.	Fine Arts/ Art Teacher	Parent	MoNE	Public	Secular	Medium	Kadıköy Dumlupınar	B
Zeliha	35	B.A.	Mathematics Teaching/ Teacher	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Secular	High	Kadıköy Zühtüpaşa	A+

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Profession/ Occupation	Title	Affiliated Institution	School Type	School Perspective	School Price	District Neighborhood	SES
Gülşah	35	B.A.	Psychology/ Psychologist	Parent	MoNE	Public	Religious	Medium	Zeytinburnu Maltepe	A
Berra	35	B.A.	Industrial Design/ Housewife	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Religious	Very High	Bahçelievler Bahçelievler	A
Bahar	34	B.A.	Turkish L. Literature/ Housewife	Parent	Municipality	Public	Secular	Low	Kadıköy Hasanpasa	B+
Aynur	44	A.A.	Social Services/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoFSS	Private	Religious	High	Kartal Esentepe	B
Hatice	34	A.A.	Theology/ Housewife	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Çekmeköy Soğukpınar	B
Şükran	37	B.A.	Child Development/ Preschool Teacher	Teacher	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Küçükçekmece Atakent	A
Demet	33	B.A.	Dentist	Parent	MoNE	Public	Secular	Medium	Bayrampaşa Kocatepe	C+
Canan	32	B.A.	Fashion Design/ Art Teacher	Parent	Municipality	Public	Secular	Low	Kadıköy Suadiye	A+
Arzu	39	B.A.	Mathematics Teacher/ Preschool Manager	Manager	MoFSS	Private	Religious	Very High	Beykoz Göksu	B+
Sümeyye	39	B.A.	Theology/ Qur'an Course Teacher	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Arnavutköy Taşoluk	E
İlknur	29	B.A.	Theology - Child Dev./ Qur'an Course Teacher	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Küçükçekmece Yeni Mahalle	C+

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Profession/ Occupation	Title	Affiliated Institution	School Type	School Perspective	School Price	District Neighborhood	SES
Cemile	35	Mid. School	Housewife	Parent	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Eyüpsultan Mimar Sinan	C+
Büşra	42	B.A.	Theology/ Qur'an Course Teacher	Teacher	PRA	Public	Religious	Low	Arnavutköy Taşoluk	E
Derya*	32	M.A.	Preschool Teaching/ Academic	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Secular	Very High	Başakşehir Başakşehir	B
Dilek*	29	B.A.	Civil Engineer/ Private Sector	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Başakşehir Başak	B
Elif*	29	B.A.	Physics/ Housewife	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Başakşehir Başak	B
Didem*	31	M.A.	Chemistry/ Graduate Student	Parent	MoNE	Private	Secular	Very High	Başakşehir Başak	B
Yasemin*	29	B.A.	Sociology/ Housewife	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	High	Eyüpsultan Defterdar	D
Gülsüm*	29	M.A.	Psychology/ Graduate Student	Parent	MoFSS	Private	Religious	Very High	Başakşehir Başakşehir	B
Nuray*	31	B.A.	Food Engineering/ Housewife	Parent	MoNE	Private	Religious	Low	Bahçelievler Bahçelievler	A
Focus Group*	40	N/A	N/A	Parent	MoNE	Private*	Religious	Very High	Üsküdar - Sultantepe	A

SOURCE Fieldwork data (2022-2025). *Preliminary interviews and focus group conducted (2019).

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