

# **How Neoliberal Education Design is Reflected in Classrooms: The Many Faces of Neoliberalism in a 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Classroom**

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## **Abstract**

*This study examines how the neoliberal education design operates in classrooms by observing in-class practices in a fourth-grade classroom of a public primary school. It is an attempt to illustrate the current structure of the public primary education system in Turkey. It discusses the faces of neoliberalism in the context of classroom practices, routine practices, rules, and teacher approval. The sample classroom in this study is located in a rural school in the Eastern Marmara, in the West of Turkey. Thirty-three students attending the observed classroom come from low socio-economic background families. Data for this paper came from a larger investigation on hidden curriculum employing a case-study methodology. A fourth-grade classroom was observed through a two-and-a-half-month period and interviews with the teacher and students were conducted. The observations and interviews took a period of two and a half months in the spring semester of the 2012-2013 academic year.*

**Keywords:** *Neoliberalisation; Hidden curriculum; Classroom rules; Teacher approval and reward; Turkey*

## **Introduction**

From the past to the present, education has been shaped by the close and complex interactions among social, economic, political, cultural structures, and the heritage of societies (Gök, 1999, p. 1). The institutionalisation of education shows historical parallelism with the process of capitalist social formation. Accordingly, the analysis of education as an institutional entity entails the questioning of its role in society. Today “the economics of educational practices is based on a neoliberal utopia designed by social engineers” (Ünal, 2005a, p. 8). In that sense, the current structure of the educational system in Turkey enables the sustainability of social mechanisms by reproducing the existing social inequalities in society that have been created and deepened by capitalism. The dominant capitalist ideology is reflected in a number of everyday classroom practices with different faces. In this paper, our primary aim is to reveal several of these practices that instrumentalise the student-teacher relationship and student-student interaction according to the market values. To do this, we briefly review the literature about the relationship between capitalism and education. We then present an observational research account to demonstrate the recent neoliberal daily life in a fourth-grade classroom by focusing on the classroom routines and rules.

Schools have two main functions in a capitalist society: first is the reproduction of the labor force required for capital accumulation. The other is the reproduction of consciousness, equipment, and values necessary for the maintenance of the institutions facilitating the conversion of the labor force into profit (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, as cited in Giroux, 2001; Althusser, 1971). The school, “what is taught, how it is taught, how students are selected and graded,

and so on”, is organized in accordance with the maintenance of the existing social and economic order (Hatcher, 2000, p. 186). Bowles and Gintis (1976) use the concept of the “correspondence principle” to explain the mutual agreement between schooling and workforce in capitalist societies. For example, both schools and factories emphasize grading, qualifications, and division of labor. In that sense the “correspondence principle” reveals the patterns of how hierarchically structured values, norms, and skills of capitalism are reflected in the social dynamics and daily practices at schools. Individuals are indoctrinated with behaviours and tendencies required by the capitalist economy via social relations at schools (Giroux, 2001). Through the form of the curriculum, the capitalist mode of assessment, accountability, surveillance type and logic have penetrated into schools.

While explaining the role of schools in capitalist societies, Althusser (1971) used the concept of “ideological apparatus” as the tool for reproduction of inequalities. He argued that schools take children from different social classes and inculcate the state ideology for years so as to shape the young generations according to the needs of the dominant class. Similarly, Apple sees ideology as the “part of a lived culture that was a result of the material conditions of one’s day-to-day practices” (1995, p. 24).

In that respect, the market relations have turned into a kind of sovereignty to the degree that identifies any social relations and designates the framework of the transformation of education regarding its content (Ercan, 1999). The meaning and purpose of education, in many ways, have been structured by

the cost accounting principles of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of the corporate order. (Giroux, 2002, p. 442)

Globally, the current education system under the surveillance of the World Bank and OECD has been designed not to free the current population and the future generations in order to explore “what we live for” and “what we wish to live for” but to persuade us that “we live for economics” (Ünal, 2005a, p. 39); “education is now big business – “edu-business”” (Hill, 2010, p. 125).

When the Turkish education system is analysed within historical and social contexts, the period following 1980s when neoliberal economy policies were implemented is seen to be the milestone. (Gök, 2004, p. 1). Along with the reconstruction of the process of accumulation in the 1980s, the commodification phenomena of education, and a semi-public service/commodity were pointed out. On the other hand, as of the second half of the 1990s, a period began when education-employment policies were formed together, making the difference between general and vocational education gradually become indistinct.

Education policies post 1990 were reformed on various discourses and concepts that legalised the process of transformation in education and were used by national and international actors very often, such as; “information society, lifelong education, flexibility-standardization-assessment, changing skills and productivity” (Uzunyayla and Ercan, 2011, p. 197-8). The way neoliberal discourses shaped, and designated educational policies is clearly seen in the statements of development plans. The following clauses appeared under the title *Increasing the Sensitivity of Education to Labor*, Demand of the Ninth Development Plan of Turkey (1996, p. 98)

570. A lifelong education strategy will be developed towards increasing the employment skills of individuals in line with the requirements of a changing and developing economy and labor market. In order to develop the skills and abilities of people, this strategy will cover mechanisms that will support increasing formal and non-formal education opportunities, strengthen the horizontal and vertical relationship between the types of education, structure apprenticeship and public education towards

these types of education as well as support the involvement of the private sector and NGOs in this area.

571. In order to develop the information systems related to the labor market, to provide the education and labor market with a more flexible structure, and to increase employment and labor productivity, work force will be trained in the areas demanded by the economy taking the life-long education strategy into consideration.

Within the framework of this design, teacher and student identities are redefined. In addition to maintaining the past emphasis on student discipline, the neoliberal framework attenuates student performances defined with test scores and holds teachers responsible for student performances. Therefore, as argued by Ünal (2005a, p. 39), the recent regulations in education are used to identify new student and teacher identities compatible with the neoliberal organization of the market. The state exerts dominance over education not only by changing the curriculum and assessment processes but also by redefining student and teacher identities. According to Bernstein, the new identities of teachers and students have been harmonised with the concept of future and combined with economic producer, consumer, and citizenship identities of people. Bernstein emphasised that

[these identities] are formed by recontextualizing selected features of the past to stabilize the future through engaging with contemporary change. (cited in Beck, 2006, p. 181)

The reflections of capitalist logic and discourse, and its assessment, accountability and surveillance mechanisms are seen in the daily life of educational institutions. The planning and the implementation of educational activities were separated from each other in the same way as design is separated from production in factories. In parallel to the separation of planning from

implementation, teachers were excluded from the process of planning the courses to be conducted. Teacher skills were redefined according to the construction of new technical skills and educational assessment. A new kind of teacher maximizing performance was put in place, setting aside irrelevant principles, or “out-moded social commitments, for whom excellence and improvement are the driving force of practice” (Ball, 2003, p. 223).

Educational inspection, one of the most effective strategies of capital, has been integrated with the production phase (Apple, 1995). Before neoliberalism reached its peak, teaching had a relatively autonomous nature. Yet, the new regulations emphasising performance pave the way to the many forms of technical and bureaucratic control (Apple, 1995). Nowadays in Turkey, it is also observed that this relative autonomy of teaching has been weakened. Teachers are subjected to the technical surveillance by means of prepared curriculum materials and to the bureaucratic surveillance and accountability by means of procedures like performance evaluation, reward, and punishment.

As argued by Apple (1995), to understand how ideologies function at schools, it is necessary to look at what is experienced concretely in daily life at schools. From this aspect, the present study is important in terms of setting an example as to how education policies are reflected in classroom practices. It examines how the neoliberal education design operates in classrooms by observing in-class practices in a fourth-grade class of a public primary school. It is an attempt to illustrate the current structure of the public primary education system in Turkey. It discusses the manifestations of neoliberalism as reflected in classroom practices, routine practices, rules, and teacher approval.

The sample classroom in this study is located in a rural school in the Eastern Marmara, in the west of Turkey. A Roma neighbourhood is close to the school.

Of the 620 students enrolled at the school, 210 come from the Roma neighbourhood, which is thus slightly more than 33% of total student enrolment. Roma families' working conditions as seasonal workers affect student attendance. According to school documentation, Roma students have more days of absence than non-Roma children. Thirty-three students attending the observed classroom come from families with a low socio-economic status. Nine students (some 27%) in the class stated that they were Romani.

This study is aimed at researching a situation in a real life, today's context or environment. Accordingly, in the selection of sampling, the school is located at a ghetto and near a Roma neighbourhood, students are from families with a low socio-economic level, and both Turkish and Roma students obtain education in the same classroom. Although Romanis and groups like Romanis live in every city in Turkey, their living space is generally formed of neighbourhoods (ghettoes), where the Romanis live (Karan, 2017, p. 12; Sulukule Volunteers Association (SVA), 2017; Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG), 2010. p. 27).

Data for this paper came from a larger investigation on hidden curriculum employing a case study methodology (Şahin, 2014). Instances and quotes used in this paper were collected during 55 hours of in-classroom observations and in-depth interviews conducted with students and the class teacher. The observations and interviews took a period of two-and-a-half months in the spring semester of the 2012-2013 academic year. The instructor was a 30-year-old female who was a trained elementary school teacher with 9 years of teaching experience. She had worked for 5 years in the same school where the research was conducted. Yet at that point, she had recently taken over the observed class after a year of maternal break.

Qualitative researchers try to comprehend the relation between actions and words (Glesne, 2010). In order to answer the questions ‘how’ and ‘why’ and to examine the facts and events in a classroom setting in-depth, the present study employed a case study model (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2006, p. 277). The method employed provided an opportunity to interpret how students structure reality, and the uniqueness and pattern in behaviours and perspectives. (Glesne, 2010).

### **Routine Practices Characterising Daily Classroom Experience: Classroom Techniques**

By unveiling the daily life of schools more realistic, answers can be given to the question as to how social transformation dynamics are reflected in schools (Gök, 1999). It is possible to observe the ideological and financial results of transformation in the educational system within the practices of how schools are operated. Although thinking and criticism are expected to arise from pedagogical praxis, giving instructions stands out as predominant, and the use of ready-made packaged curriculum materials has increased (Giroux, 2001). The relationship established with teaching materials determines not only the relationship and interaction of teachers with students, but also determines and transforms the rapport and interaction of students with teachers and one another. During lesson periods, students are expected to interact more with the lesson materials rather than with each other. As argued by Apple (1995), we observed that students interact with the teacher and with each other less. They were interested only in materials and they gradually got used to the standardised procedures.

Since the introduction of the *Law on the Unification of Education* in 1924, the Turkish Ministry of National Education has continued to determine the use of what sources to teach, what contents are appropriate, and what books to use. Although the curriculum was centralised by the state, the teachers had a certain



degree of freedom to prepare their own materials and choose different reference books. With recent changes, however, teachers are required to conduct lessons through the teacher guidebook prepared and given to them by the ministry. Student course books, student workbooks, and teacher guidebooks are sent to schools as cost-free materials every year by the Ministry of National Education. Teachers cannot choose any books as course books, except for those selected by the ministry. The primary school curriculum involves learning and teaching activities applicable to every learning outcome. What teachers are expected to do in classrooms, what to teach, what kind of questions they are supposed to ask and even the pictures of relevant pages in course books are all included in the teacher guidebooks. As for teachers, lesson planning is more about the presentation of lesson materials. In this context, a teacher is someone transmitting the planned, ready-made content from guidebooks to students. In this transmission process there is no room for curiosity, creativity or teacher autonomy.

In the classroom observed, the teacher conducted lessons according to the Teacher Guidebook directly in hand, while mostly sitting at her desk. The most common lesson strategy by the class teacher as observed was to order students to read the related chapters in the student course book alone and to respond to questions in the student workbooks. During the class instruction, it was repeatedly observed that the teacher was generally non-expressive, unenthusiastic, she spoke in a monotonous tone of voice, and giving instructions to students rather than teaching interactively. Instructions were given in imperative mood like “open this page”, “read this text”, and “do the exercise on that page in the workbook”. By giving simple and short instructions to the students in class session, the teacher told them what to do in what situations, using the grammatical imperative. This mode of discourse to students reflected the importance of the orders and rules of the dominant ideology. While they

behaved according to the orders of the teacher, they sat passively in their chairs. Typical of teacher discourse were the following instructions:

Read it, find the suitable word and raise your hand!

Those who are done, go to the 6th activity.

Do it by reading the instruction above. In the instruction, it says 'match'.

Those who have finished both, open the workbook to page 45.

In the lessons, students did not use any other reference book except for the student course books and workbooks. They were never asked to raise their own questions outside the questions in the book. When the teacher asked a question, she called on one of the students who raised their hands first without allocating enough time for them to think. If the given response was deemed correct, the respondent dictated to the other students the right answer by reading the sentence aloud again. Sometimes the teacher took that role and read the sentence aloud, instructing the students to write the sentence down in their workbooks. It was observed that the teacher often reminded the students about the page and question numbers. She gave great importance to the fact that the questions in student workbooks were answered and that students should fill in the relevant blanks. For instance:

**Teacher:** Has everyone written the answers in their books as they are?

**Students:** Yes!

**Teacher:** So, we are reading the pages 140 and 141. Let's see who fulfils their responsibilities.

It was seen that even the students who were not engaged in the lesson made an effort to fill in the blanks in the workbook and when they fell behind, they attempted to write the answers of the relevant chapters by looking at the notes of their friends sitting next to, in front of, or behind them. Here we can argue

that the teacher's emphasis is on the acquisition of the ready-made knowledge passively.

In this teacher-centered, highly "frontal" instruction there is no room for even spontaneous student participation. Students were expected to complete the activities in the student workbooks considering the order and within the duration specified by the teacher. The teacher did not approve of any activity decided by the students autonomously. Students cannot do an activity in student workbooks beforehand, nor can they pass on to another activity without being specifically told to do so by the teacher. In such cases, it was observed that the teacher warned the students. For instance, after a passage was read in the Turkish lesson, the teacher said: "Now we are starting our summaries". When one of the students said: "My dear teacher, I have started a little bit already", the teacher said: "We are getting started now. Make sure that you have a title!"

Rather than doing creative or original work, it is important that students complete the relevant activity within the expected time frame no matter how they do it. For example, in a class activity, students were asked to draw a picture into empty check boxes related to the text they read in the course book. The teacher told the students:

If you can't do it, turn to the previous page in your books and look at the picture on the front of the page and draw the same picture

With this statement she meant the picture above the reading passage in the book and she encouraged her students to copy the image. Furthermore, we also observed that whether the students followed the activities in student workbooks or not, it was utilized as a means of control by the teacher. When there were students not paying attention to activities, talking to their friends or standing,

the teacher addressed questions to those students deliberately, despite the fact that she knew they could not reply. Thus, it was an attempt to make them become involved in activities in the book. In the course of the observations, the teacher asked students questions appropriate to their levels from course books. For instance:

Let's complete the story map now.

Who is the main character?

Who are the supporting characters?

The teacher sometimes asked questions about topics on which students could hardly comment. These were factual questions from the story that a fourth grader could easily reply to without any deep engagement with the text. The following instances illustrated that the teacher asked only close-ended questions and avoided 'why' questions. For instance:

**Teacher:** Does anyone else have an idea? Does anyone know anything about this?

**Students:** ...

**Teacher:** Can anyone give examples of scientists?

**Student:** I can't because I don't know about them

**Teacher:** Who have we just read about?

During the observations, it was seen that teaching strategies, methods, and techniques that would encourage and pave the way for students to work together in lessons were not employed. The teacher expected students only to obey the directives given by her and interact with the teaching materials. When they got involved in communications with their friends, the teacher warned them. During the class periods, the course books or student workbooks were present on students' desks. Educational activities were designed in a way that students could interact only with their teacher. The teacher never used group work or

play as a teaching strategy. We suggest that this situation alienated students during the learning process and prevented them from experiencing how to learn from their peers.

In a curriculum and course materials in the formation and selection of which students and teachers play no role, students are expected to learn the same curriculum in the same way and pace (Hern, 2008, p. 19). Students are taught abstract ways of thinking through daily life experiences in classes just like Henry Ford's durable montage against rusting; they develop a mechanical cognitive style. Teachers are given directives to

[...] divide behaviours, measure fluid social activity in terms of "inputs" and "outputs" and reduce people to computer print outs. (McLaren, 2011, p. 349)

### **Winners and Losers**

It was observed that the teacher used only didactic teaching and question-answer techniques. She conducted her lessons based solely on the course books and the student workbooks. She rarely used instructional technology and did not do any preliminary preparation for the content of materials she would present to students. By giving directives in the simple imperative mood, the teacher told students which page to open, what to write as an answer to a question, etc. The observations carried out in this classroom were compatible with the findings of Keddie (1971) and Anyon (1981) studies regarding how educational activities were conducted at schools with students predominantly from a low socio-economic background.

Students, who are called on by the teacher while conducting lessons, and those on whom the teacher kept an eye as to whether they paid attention or not were mostly located in the row just opposite the teacher's desk and in the middle row. Most of these students came from the families representing the dominant culture

of the country. It was observed that half of the students who sat next to the wall were Roma (c.f. Figure 1). They were uninterested in lessons, and the teacher was engaged with the students sitting next to windows and those sitting in the middle row. The seating arrangement of the classroom demonstrated spatially a clear exclusion based on ethnic background. The position of the Roma cluster clearly represented the social hierarchy in the broader community (Figure 1).

During our observations, we rarely encountered a situation in which a Roma student sat next to a student from the dominant culture. During the interview the teacher said that she had made several “attempts to mingle the class, but these were in vain since there are invincible differences between Roma students and others in terms of hygiene and life styles”. Furthermore, the most hardworking student in the classroom was male and he always sat at the closest desk to the teacher’s desk.

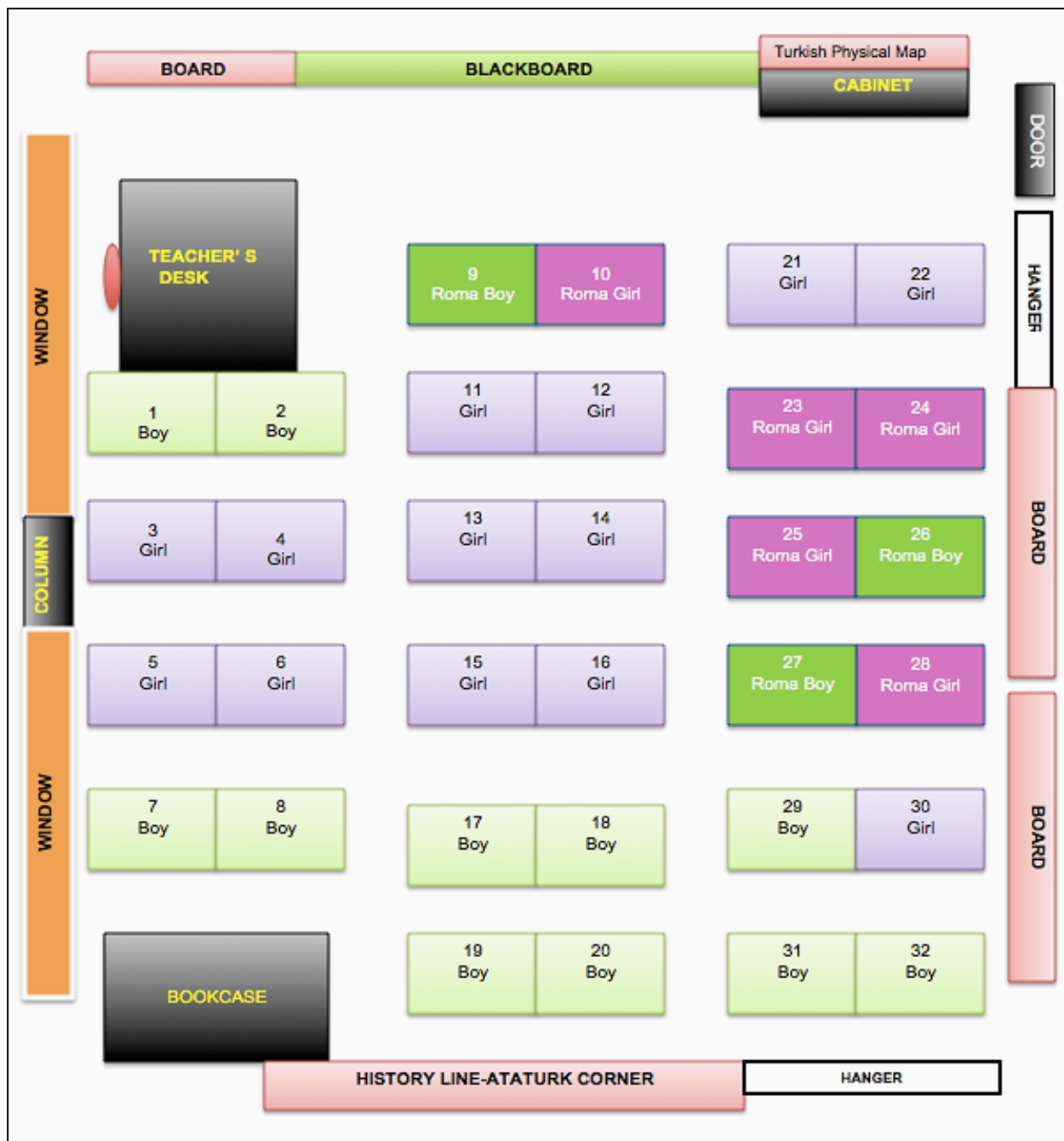


Figure 1: The physical plan of the classroom

The relationship among the school components was arranged according to the standards of predefined power, sovereignty, and control. In classrooms, the interaction took place not only between the teacher and students or among the students – interaction was also impacted and structured by elements of the socio-economic class, gender, ethnic background, personality characteristics, beliefs, values and manners of each individual. These multi-layered interactions

formed complex dynamics of the classroom's climate. In our case, we noted that the teacher-student and student-student relationships were defined and arranged according to their positions in the social hierarchy. As discussed by Bernstein (1975; 2003), vertical and hierarchical relationships define and shape the horizontal relationships in societies that rely on the sharp social division of labor.

Accordingly, our case-study classroom revealed the position of Roma students at the bottom of the vertical hierarchy. In other words, Roma people's position in the society defined by the social distribution of labor was reproduced in the classroom. The hierarchy in division of labor also regulated the Roma students' positions in the horizontal relationship with their peers in this classroom. Roma students were called to as "Romani or Gypsies" in their classrooms before their names in the class list. In the course of our observations, the reasons Roma students had a high level of absenteeism were never brought up. Tellingly, the teacher asked a student from the dominant culture why he did not come to the exam whereas the same question was never asked of Roma students who were absent on the same day.

It is possible to contend that the teacher and students in this classroom have become inured (and thus indifferent) to the absenteeism of Roma students. It is known by the teacher and the other students in the classroom that especially when the weather gets hotter, the Roma students go to work in agriculture picking vegetables together with their mothers. The other students in the classroom referred to Roma students as "Romanis" rather than referring to them by their names. For instance, during the recess, a student distributing the school milk delivered by the state said "There are 24 students in our classroom". Another student replied: "The Romanis aren't coming". Another student interrupted: "They went to 'araka<sup>1</sup>".



According to researches, Roma students are made to sit in groups at the back rows of classrooms that do not attract any attention. Roma students' absence in school is also considered normal (Marsh, 2008). Moreover, it is seen that teachers do not welcome children with different ethnic backgrounds due to the fact that they are from different culture and that their families are seen to be troublemakers in the region they settle, and also the children do not have the responsibilities of studentship (Bütün Kar and Mercan Uzun, 2017).

Under these circumstances, children in Turkey belonging to the groups of Romanis or those living like the Romanis, are in the group with lowest rate of enrolment to schools. (Unicef, 2012). Moreover, Roma students' enrolment in school does not mean that they have access to the 'right to education'. The students who do enrol face discrimination in a number of ways in schools. Roma students' exposure to discrimination and alienation are among the reasons of their drop out of school and maintain high rate of absence (Marsh, 2008; Akkan, Deniz and Ertan, 2011; ERRC, 2013; Kaya, 2015; Karan, 2017).

Although there are people speaking Romani, Lomavren, Domari and Abdoltili among Roma groups in Turkey, the number of people knowing and speaking them has decreased considerably and these languages and dialects are now among the languages becoming extinct (UNESCO)<sup>2</sup>. Among the Romanis in Turkey, language competence among the younger people has decreased considerably. Only few of the middle-aged generation have full competence (Cech and Heinschink, 1997). Although the number is unknown, Roma and children belonging to groups living like Roma whose mother language is not Turkish are more likely to fail compared to children whose mother language is Turkish (Kaya, 2015, p. 15)

It was also observed that the teacher did not warn Roma students as long as they

did not disrupt the class and stand up. She allowed them to speak to each other in a low tone of voice during class periods unless they interrupted with the instruction. Likewise, while correcting non-Roma students' incorrect use of Turkish, the teacher was observed not intervening to correct Roma students' incorrect use of the language. For instance, in the observed classroom, the teacher asked the meaning of the word 'suddenly'. A Roma student used it in a sentence: "My aunts came from suddenly (ansızdan)". The teacher did not warn a Roma student although she used the word incorrectly. The teacher just said, "You used it in a sentence". Although the Roma student used the word incorrectly in the sentence, the teacher, considering it as correct, did not correct it. This anecdotal data supports Apple's (2004a) view about the ideological role of the school in teaching. As discussed by Apple, teachers have the tendency to tolerate the academic mistakes of the part of "minority" group students, children of the poor and so on. Apple argues that from the market point of view, "it is less consequential to the economy than is the generation of the knowledge itself" (p. 37):

A corporate economy requires the production of high levels of technical knowledge to keep the economic apparatus running effectively and to become more sophisticated in the maximization of opportunities for economic expansion. Within certain limits, what is actually required is not the widespread distribution of this high-status knowledge to the populace in general. What is needed more is to maximize its production. As long as the knowledge form is continually and efficiently produced, the school itself, at least in this major aspect of its function, is efficient (pp. 36-37).

In this study, the observed teacher behaviours and classroom practices were parallel with the Banking Education Model of Freire (2000, p. 74). In this model, teachers teach, students learn passively; teachers speak, students listen to

them carefully. Teachers think and decide for students and they discipline their students. Teachers choose and carry out their choices, students conform to these. Teachers decide what to teach, students obey. In short, teachers are the subjects of the learning process and students are the objects of it.

Only two class periods are allocated for physical education, one class period for visual arts (painting) and one class period for music out of the 30 class-hours in a weekly schedule on the wall in the classroom. In fact, in the observed classroom, students were very enthusiastic about physical education, painting and music courses. These courses were also taught by the classroom teacher. We observed that students did not change their clothes before they went to the schoolyard for the physical education class. They were engaged in free play. The teacher did not take any guiding role while they played. It was observed that students were very eager to go out in the garden for a physical education class. However, they were often threatened by their teacher not to be permitted to go outside whenever they became disruptive and loud.

According to the interviews with students, it was clear that “not going out for physical education class” was one of the punitive actions taken by the teacher. In the course of our observations, the teacher instructed mathematics twice instead of physical education and overlooked the desires of her students. For example, during a physical education class when the teacher entered the classroom, the students cheered altogether: “Physical Education, Physical Education”. “Let’s do some maths, then we’ll see,” said the teacher. As mutterings multiplied in the classroom, “a little, a little” said the teacher. When the mutterings kept on, she said: “if you behave like this, you can never go out again for physical education”.

During the music courses the teacher had never been witnessed teaching a new song or playing a new musical instrument. Students solely or a few volunteers together went to the classroom blackboard and sang together freely. The songs they sang were either school songs or any type of songs from popular culture they were familiar with. The students from a Roma background were observed to be very active and led the lessons with their body language and enthusiasm during the music classes. Students listened to them paying utmost attention even if they sang non-popular, previously unheard songs. The teacher sometimes played a song from the computer or from her mobile phone or had students watch a music video from a database online. The entire class participated in the songs played with great enthusiasm and a loud voice.

In painting courses, students drew their pictures on white paper and used only dry paints to colour. The student without the colouring pen of his or her interest has to learn how to get it from a friend as a result of a long bargain. The cited negotiation between two students illustrated a reflection of the logic “a little is better than nothing” in the classroom environment.

**Student A:** I can lend you my pastel, but you will give me 5 stickers.

**Student B:** Five is too many, one only.

**Student A:** I will not lend you them.

In a world extremely competitive in terms of economics, students as the “laborers of the future”, must be equipped with skills and attitudes required for productive and effective competition, and behave in a way to increase their own benefit in an utmost way (Apple, 2004b, p. 99). In a research which illustrates that students in Turkey have been affected by neoliberal individualism heavily (Kahveci and Sever, 2018), it was stated that individuals had to apply free market principles to every field of their life just like a financial company.

The imagery of neoliberal education in fact anticipates many mechanisms that let market relations impact education, and that rationalize the individual and the system. These mechanisms that we observe in the holistic process of education system and the school practices are good for instrumentalising teachers', students' and families' relationship with education. When an attitude for the economic rationality becomes, "an attitude adopted by social institutions and internalized by the individuals", people give up questioning it, hence, the operation of the society is assured. This is how both social and individual reactions became 'foreseeable' and 'became instrumentalized'. Once people begin and act instrumental, what they do, becomes worthless for themselves (Ünal, 2005a, p. 40).

### **Classroom Rules from Students' Perspective**

It is highly astonishing to observe how the students in the classroom gave different meanings to school rules and what type of behaviours they performed to obtain their teacher's approval and reward. There was no list of classroom rules anywhere in the classroom. During the interviews a majority of the students (72%) stated that the teacher made the rules without asking students for their opinions. In the interviews, students could not express why the rules were important for arranging the daily life of the class. They focused on the obligatory nature of the rules and defined the rules as teachers' statements following student behaviour with a negative outcome. Students figured out that their actions and attitudes had an active role in the teachers' prescription of the rules. However, some students stated that "the teacher did not pay any attention to what students said". They assigned themselves a passive role in terms of obeying the authority of the teacher unconditionally. Here are some excerpts from the student interviews:

Our teacher told us to keep the desks clean and set rules for us when she saw the garbage on the floor and under the desks.

The teacher became angry with students for their actions, and so she established a rule.

C students and D students were fighting, afterwards students were punished.

The interviews demonstrated that students had not participated in the process of making rules for the classrooms where they spend most of their time. It was observed that the students were aware of the tendency that their friends and themselves would be accused by the teacher when the social organization of the classroom turned chaotic. Students also noticed that the classroom rules were established as an outcome of the negative behaviour of students. The students explained the reasons why rules were set up by observing the teachers' reactions to certain behaviours. The teacher also stated that she never invited her students to discuss the rules. The quotations by students below illustrate how they tried to make sense of the rules without the teacher's guidance.

When we do not obey the rules there will be many fights, many things, anything can happen.

There will be disturbances in the class if we speak without raising our hands.

After throwing litter, everywhere will be full of garbage.

Oh my God, there's dust in the classroom as we walk around.

We should not play games in the classroom, we play ball and then there's some dust.

The classroom smells bad, everywhere it gets dusty, we may be sick. That's it.

We cannot write on the board; the classroom smells bad if we do not open windows to ventilate the class. The desks will be messy if we don't put them in order.

The teacher banned coming to school without combing your hair. We feel disturbed when we have our lessons. Hair comes down to block the view.

We get lower grades in our report cards, in other words, that means we haven't improved.

As shown, the students interpreted the reasons for the classroom rules in an outcome-oriented and pragmatic perspective. The student who justifies the rule of not playing in the classroom because of “dust” does not question why there was dust on the ground. Student interviews revealed there was that no participatory democratic approach in the classroom. The students tended to accept the ultimate authority of the teacher as the rule-maker. It can be said that students were completely excluded from the decision-making mechanisms of the rules that regulate their daily life at school. Students are expected to obey to rules in the classroom community passively and without questioning anything. This process also prepares them for their prospective passive roles as obedient citizens. Furthermore, the fact that teachers set up rules suddenly, arbitrarily and unexpectedly, without discussing the justifications with students, reinforces the students' perception that social rules cannot be questioned and changed.

In interviews with students, 30 students mentioned a total of 47 different classroom rules. On the other hand, the teacher clearly said that she had dictated only four rules to the students since the beginning of the school year. Despite the fact that there are no classroom rules in classes conducted democratically with joint participation of the teacher and students, students perceived different classroom rules depending on their status in the classroom. During interviews, the students stated that their behaviour led to most warnings and punishment from the teacher.

For instance, in classroom observations we saw that the student Emel, who stood up most and received the most warnings from the teacher, said in the interview that “not standing up and not wandering around in the classroom” was as a classroom rule. Students had a passive status in the classroom, yet they made inferences about the teacher’s expectations and used logical explanations, as might be expected given their ages. However, students’ attempts to reason and discuss matters are not supported by the content of the curriculum and the teaching methods applied by the teacher. Hence, student potential to raise questions and engage in reasonable dialogue is suppressed.

The first 5 rules most commonly stated by students are shown below:

1. Not littering
2. Not to speak (to someone) in class
3. Not to speak without raising your hand.
4. Not to fight.
5. Not to play (ball, rope jumping) in the classroom.

The most commonly cited classroom rule was “not to litter”. It was stated by 14 students, nine of whom were female. Four of the eight Roma students also stated that this as a classroom rule. However, we never noted that the teacher made a connection between these rules and the social life ongoing in the classroom. For instance, the rule not to litter is regarded as confined to this classroom environment; everyday experiences of children are not discussed even at a level of basic knowledge. When looking at the classroom rules, it was seen that many of the issues stated by students as classroom rules referred to action and behaviour they should not engage in: i.e. classroom rules were defined by focusing on the negative outcomes of student behaviour. Particularly they made a rule for behaviour that led to a warning or punishment.



The teacher as the ultimate authority set up the rules in the classroom and assumed that the students would conform to these: no talking in the lessons, no talking without raising hands, no playing games in the classroom, no chewing, no running in the classroom, no writing on the board, no marking on desks, no climbing on desks, no making noise when the teacher isn't in class, no shouting, no walking around the classroom, knocking on the door before entering the classroom, no going to the restroom during class time, no eating in class, no messing up the tablecloth, no coming to school with uncombed hair. Students were supposed to learn to take care of their physiological needs during the breaks. They should not go to the toilet during lessons or eat anything without permission. They must control their physical activities. They must learn not to damage the school (state) property. They must learn bureaucracy, they must wait for the teacher at their desks, they must keep quiet when the teacher is not present in class, they must keep the classroom door closed while waiting for the teacher so that they do not insult the teacher.

As seen most of the rules stated by students were related to the social-organisational nature of the classroom. In parallel with the interviews held with students, the classroom observations also made it clear that students prioritized the rules regarding order in the classroom over any other rules. This parallelism supported our comment that students had the tendency to identify negative behavior the teacher warned against as classroom rules rather than any positive rules approved of or appreciated by the teacher.

On the other hand, rules regarding classroom ethics and safety did not have priority in classroom discourse. The teacher prohibited certain actions such as fighting or running without discussing what these actions could cause. Despite the teacher's indifference, students emphasized that it was wrong to hurt others on purpose. Yet, the reasoning of students was disregarded by the teacher. She

always used imperatives like “fighting is banned, running is banned”.

According to the discourse of the teacher, classroom management without any problems was the top priority. What lies behind even possibly hurting themselves and others, leading to a prohibition and rule, was never articulated.

Consistent with the rules stated by the students we observed that the teacher warned her students most when they violated the classroom order. For example, she warned the students most when they talked in lessons and made noise. Exchanging their seats without permission was in second place as disturbing behaviour; not sitting properly (facing the teacher and board), standing up during class and not preparing lesson materials came third. Coming to class late, not using time efficiently and not following the reading passage ranked fourth. The frequency of teacher warnings for violent behaviour, hurting others, and safety appeared towards the bottom of the list. We observed how the teacher was responded to in connection with violence between two students. She scolded the student who had thrown a stone at his friend and threatened the student with a possible outcome: “What if his family complains and the police comes to the school!” The teacher emphasised the legal punishment that the student who threw the stone might face in the future.

Once again, the teacher’s priority is to intimidate and frighten the students rather than encouraging them to think about our human responsibility in situations of possible harm to others. Furthermore, she never bothered about the reasons for the fight between two students. Her only motivation was to remove the unwanted behaviour, rather than to change the perception and motivation of the student who threw stone. This observation illustrated that the threat of invoking the police was a dissuasive factor for the primary school 4<sup>th</sup> grade students to stop causing harm and violence.

### **Teachers' Approval and Reward**

Student' behaviour so as to receive teacher approval and reward can be an example of the banking education model defined by Freire. For instance, when students exhibit favoured behaviours and were rewarded with a 'star' by the teacher, they were more likely to perform these acts either by telling the teacher or trying to let the teacher notice it. The teacher promised that she would take the student with the greatest number of stars to dinner at the end of the year. Hence, the students were interested in the stars to be obtained from the teacher rather than the content and intention of the behaviour. The solidarity and cooperation between students were shaped by how many stars could be obtained by paying attention to the presumed rules. Social life was instrumentalised with a reward system by encouraging each student to act as a spy.

The teacher engaged in warnings 66 times; by contrast, she stated her appreciation and approval 21 times. This observation was also consistent with our previous discussion about how the students defined classroom rules by focusing on instances of negative behaviour.

This condition shows that instances of negative behaviour of students in this classroom were more likely to be emphasised and noticed by the teacher. Most of the statements of teacher approval (18 times) were expressed when the students answered the questions in the way the teacher wanted. In other words, the teacher performed her profession by using reward and punishment mechanisms. This is consistent with Giroux's argument (2010) that the new definition of teaching in neoliberal times characterized teachers as technicians in charge of transferring ready-made knowledge. This aim of such transfer of knowledge was not to pave a way to any transformation in social or cognitive domains of the students. The teacher must follow the steps defined by the

Ministry of National Education since (s)he will also be subjected to reward or punishment according to the results of a performance evaluation.

In the schools where students come from lower socio-economic strata, there is usually just one class teacher during the entire span of primary education. Students complete their primary education only with one teacher unless there is a teacher change. Considering that the classroom teacher's expectation affects the relationship among students, it is highly probable that students will be subjected to similar types of approval and rejection by their teacher during the entire duration of their primary education. In that sense, another striking observation was that there was no mention of any Roma students among those who obtained approval and appreciation from the teacher. However, the three students whom the teacher warned most were from Roma.

The interviews conducted with the students provided the following examples for the behaviour approved and appreciated by the teacher: doing homework, being hardworking, not littering, not speaking without raising the hand, being quiet, behaving well, listening to the teacher, emptying the trash bin, keeping the school clean, and ventilating the classroom. The students expressed that the teacher appreciated them most when they did their homework. Consistent with the nature of the presumed rules the teacher warnings were also more likely to focus on maintaining order in the classroom and classroom management. She aimed to correct student behaviours that led to disorder in the classroom. On the other hand, any behaviour that would help her lecturing and running of the classroom smoothly were appreciated. Many of the students said that the teacher appreciated them when they did a favour for their friends. Some of the behaviours that students considered as a favour were letting their friend sit beside while there was no empty seat in the classroom and sharing lunch with friends who had no money.

For instance, our friend has no money, when other friends give him or her some food, the teacher gives them stars. They both go together and tell this to the teacher. The teacher gives stars to those who give food or money.

There were some students who told their friends that the teacher gave them stars when they did a favour for their friends. It can be thought that the teacher gave a star to the student who shared his/her lunch with a friend in order to encourage sharing with each other. However, this course of conduct can be questioned in many respects. It could be highly confusing for a student to take his or her friend to the teacher and tell the teacher about this conduct in order to obtain more stars. At the same time, this situation puts the receiver of the help into a vulnerable position when we analyse this neoliberal charity culture in the classroom from the perspective of student rights and human dignity. Yet, one can also claim that it was reasonable for teachers to make some effort in trying to establish and popularise the culture of sharing and solidarity. However, the reduction of sharing and solidarity among students into a system of stars was questionable. Yet when we consider the rules of today's world, the normalization of the charity could be an appropriate attitude in that everything was 'standardised' in every sphere of activity.

The students stated that they received stars most when they did their homework, did a favour for their friends, and remained quiet. There were also some students who commented that the teacher was giving food, letting students have a physical education class, and giving books as rewards. It was interesting to see that some students said having a physical education class was a 'reward'. The teacher violated students' rights and manipulated students according to a behavioural agenda as a way to discipline students. Instead of understanding the reasons for student 'misbehaviour', this manipulation encouraged them to be seen as if they were 'well-behaved'.

The teacher, who is formed within the ‘new professionalism’<sup>3</sup> of neoliberal education design, is guided towards acting rather than thinking. “New” teachers base his/her life in school on teaching rather than learning; he/she is motivated to gain skills and efficiencies rather than values and ethics (Ünal, 2005b, p. 8).

## **Conclusion**

This study is one of the few examples in the educational studies literature in Turkey that empirically seeks to document the daily life in a classroom in a public primary school through a short field-ethnographic observational study. Researchers provided rich information to evaluate participants’ interviews by their involvement in personal relationships with participants and their participation in community life.

Gradually, researchers learned about idiosyncratic and systematic differences between participants’ accounts and actual events, and it was largely be their observations that enabled them to do so (Agar, 1980, p. 107). The first author of the paper was a participant observer during two-and-a-half months. Her field notes and transcripts of interviews with the teacher and students allowed us to merge different components of the classroom so as to understand how capitalism (as defined in the last three decades as neoliberalism) is experienced in a 4<sup>th</sup>-grade classroom during the school year 2012-2013 in a rural Turkish educational context.

Students’ profiles in the classroom observed bear the traces of a “homo economicus” identity in which economics define the individual. This is

an individual with masculine identity who behaves based on cost-benefit analysis and chooses actions that maximizes his own benefits most. (Ünal, 2005a, p. 41)

The traces of this ideology also pervaded the students' identity. This study attempts to analyse the way macro structures influence micro processes as much as the way micro processes in schools serve for the establishment of macro structures.

As discussed above, we can trace this ideology in the symbolic acts allowed in the classroom. The students who bargained to obtain more 'stickers' in exchange with a colouring pen; and the student who took his friend up to teacher, for whom he bought some food because that friend did not have a lunch box, in order to obtain some stars, were the most striking examples of how neoliberal economics were experienced in a 4th-grade classroom.

The relationships among the students were formed based on cost-benefit comparison rather than the culture of solidarity. This approach, that reproduces and preserves inequalities rather than altering and transforming the relationships between the students, attracts attention. The Roma students in the classroom sat together in a condensed space parallel with the place they occupy; peripheralised in the social hierarchy. The teacher did not pay any attention as to whether they participated in the class activities or were paying attention to the teacher as long as they did not disturb the class. Their mistakes were not corrected; in short, they were ignored. The daily practices in the classroom formed and reinforced the relationships between the students from the dominant ethnic group and others.

Therefore, as argued by Bernstein (1975; 2003), students' academic success and academic trajectories cannot be imagined without considering the horizontal and vertical structures of the broader society. The relationships established between teachers and students, and the relationships among the students during the process of academic life in the classroom, were structured and reproduced in accordance with certain predefined power and control mechanisms.

Accordingly, we observed that Roma students were at the bottom of the class in terms of absenteeism and lowest grades. Not surprisingly, the teacher's favourite was the most hardworking student, a male classmate from the dominant culture. Studies of social relations and teacher-student interactions showed difference in different socio-economic classes (Keddie, 1971; Anyon, 1980; Oakes, 1982) and different ethnic backgrounds (Rubovits and Maehr, 1973; Marsh, 2008; Akkan, Deniz and Ertan, 2011; ERRC, 2013; Kaya, 2015; Karan, 2017) at the same school. Similarly, some research conducted in Turkey found out that the socio-economic status of students determines the type of school they go to and education they get, as well as their academic achievements (Doğan, 1993; Yelgün and Karaman, 2015; Sarier, 2016) to a large extent.

The neoliberal agenda assigns teachers the role of technicians (Giroux, 2001; Maguire, 2002; Ünal, 2005b). Thus, we noticed that the teacher transfers information through a chain of command and power without paying attention to the opinions and daily life practices of the students. The teacher as technician minimises the participation of students in lessons and disciplines them by putting them in a state of passive acceptance while glorifying mechanisms of reward and punishment. After all, the teacher is also assessed in accordance with his/her performance. The perspective of new managerialism based on surveillance, control and pressure is effective in the transformation of teacher's perspective of their profession, self-respect, and their perception of the student. Teachers have become victims who gradually lose control over their professions, rather than professionals who can provide critical judgement and reaction (Hill, 2016, p. 23-4).



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<sup>1</sup> Large- sized pea.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap.html>

<sup>3</sup> The traditional meaning of professionalism includes a professional person's place in a semi-autonomous position within his/her own knowledge of expertise and perspective. However, "new" professionalism, which gains content with neoliberal forms, is a concept that guides and regulates professional person externally and makes him/her unqualified. (Ünal, 2005b, p. 15).

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