# Schools in the Nexus of Neoliberal Urban Transformation and Education Policy Change

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## Abstract

*Drawing on field research carried out on Istanbul school geography, this paper analyzes the co-constitutive relationship between school spaces and urban transformation in Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey. Following a brief discussion of its theoretical framework, the paper describes how relocation of Istanbul inner-city public schools has become far more complicated and entangled with the cultural character of the transformation of education in Turkey and transformation of Istanbul. Revealing the close link between urban policy and education policy in the city, the paper argues that school topography in Istanbul interacts with current urban policies and this interaction facilitates the destabilisation of public schools, creates new hierarchies, and perpetuates the existing nature of power relationships. Rather than seeing it as a unidirectional relationship, the paper points to the co-constitutive manner of this interaction and discusses possible implications of the removal of a secular school from its neighbourhood. While existing body of international literature emphasizes the racialised character of the interplay between urban renewal and urban school restructuring, this article introduces into the literature the religion/secularism dimension, which has hitherto not been discussed.*

**Keywords:** neoliberalisation, school relocation, urban education, urban transformation, de-secularisation

## Introduction

The interaction between educational activities in cities and transformation of urban space has been well documented in the context of British and American education policy (see Cucchiara 2008, Gulson 2011, Lipman 2007, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, Pedroni 2011). This body of literature points to the racial displacement implicated in school relocations and closings occurring in the context of urban renewal. There has always been an urban and spatial dimension to Turkish education policy making, and there is widespread popular recognition regarding the existence of an interaction between the current urban condition and education. However, there is paucity of research in Turkey documenting both the past and the current situation of urban education. Exploring this issue is a critical attempt as urban transformation in Turkey has become a pressing social issue that has ramifications in all spheres of citizens' lives, particularly in megacities such as Istanbul.

A vast body of scholarship on neoliberalism has accumulated over the past few decades. A purely theoretical definition of neoliberalism is not possible as neoliberalism is not a mode of production (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005, p.1). Various terms have been coined to define neoliberalism: a class project (Harvey 2007), an economic programme (Steger and Roy 2010), a hegemonic project (Clarke 2004a), a theory of particular political economic practices (Harvey, 2005, p.2; 2007, p.22), a "planetary vulgate" (Bourdieu &Wacquant, 2001), and "specific styles of the general mentality of rule" (Dean 1999, p.149, 155). However, in most general terms, neoliberalism is conceptualized, as the term suggests, through its intellectual lineage with liberalism (Jessop 2002, Palley2005, Olssen1996) and understood as a signifier for a set of pathways of

market-based regulatory restructuring aiming at the dissolution of the policies and institutions of the liberal welfare states.

2000s have been marked by expansion of Istanbul and implementation of various urban projects in the city. Urban projects as neoliberal tools have been the means whereby the construction and real estate industry has achieved state-led profitable investment, but they have also generated new forms of segregation and inequalities (Aksoy 2012, Keyder2005a, 2005b, 2011, Öz and Eder 2012). Bartu-Candan and Kolluoğlu (2008) express their feelings about the changing face of Istanbul as follows: "we are witnessing with awe, horror or indifferent familiarity an Istanbul changing rapidly in terms of its spaces, the relations it comprises and its imaginary, as the city has undergone a neoliberal restructuring over the past two decades" (p.5).

Urban transformation of Istanbul goes back to the 19th century (Kurtuluş and Türkün 2005), but neoliberal urban regime started in the 1980s (Çalişkan et al. 2012), in the aftermath of the 1980 military takeover that initiated economic liberalisation in Turkey (Öniş 1991 in Kuyucu and Ünsal 2010). In this period, Istanbul was chosen as the showcase to demonstrate Turkey's openness to neoliberalisation and its aspiration to become a part of global economy (Karaman2008). The neoliberal phase of urban restructuring was accelerated with the ascent of the Justice and Development party to power in 2002 as a single party government. The JDP government changed the legal framework in a way to facilitate capital accumulation through investment in urban land (Türkün 2011, Yalçintan et el. 2014), and urban capital accumulation processes were articulated to capitalism in an unprecedented way. As urban land governance shifted from a "populist" mode to a "neoliberal" one (Kuyucu and Ünsal 2010), thousands of low-income people have been displaced from their neighborhoods (Lovering and Türkmen 2011). Also, dramatic changes have

taken place not only in the way material space is organized, but also in the ways various actors experienced the city.

Urban transformation in Istanbul for capital accumulation purposes displays both tenets of the worldwide transformation phenomenon and distinctive local characteristics (Lovering and Türkmen 2011).State promotion of large scale urban projects (Karaman 2008, Türkün 2011, Yalçıntan et al. 2014), clearing off the inner city areas from low-income settlements (Kuyucu and Ünsal 2010, Sakizlioglu 2007, Karaman 2008),and displacement of the urban poor (Bartu-Candan and Kolluoglu 2008, Lovering and Türkmen 2011) are some of the worldwide examples from Istanbul. Urban "neoliberalism's symbiotic coupling with Islamism" Karaman 2013, p.2) and the authoritarian characteristic of urban transformation (Lovering and Türkmen 2011) are among the local characteristics.

Education has not been immune to the changes in neoliberalising Istanbul. Neoliberalisation in and of education has long been an issue. Neoliberalism is the application of a set of regulatory economic principles to the "organizational, political, and ideological reorganization of capitalism" under specific historical and geographical conditions (Brenner and Theodore 2005, p.102). It involves redrawing the boundaries between public and private (Clarke, 2004a), deregulation of the economy, and commercialization of social services. In the light of these definitions, drive towards neoliberalisation in education, which is a central apparatus for the reproduction of the conditions of capital accumulation, is not unforeseen. However, what is worthy of attention is that, in the context of Istanbul, neoliberal urbanism and education policy have become inextricably intertwined, and spaces of education have become conspicuous symbols of urban conflicts and inconsistencies.

Drawing on research carried out on Istanbul school geography and urban transformation, this paper illuminates the reciprocity of neoliberal urbanism and education policy in Istanbul and argues that the way this interaction plays out contributes to the deterioration of public schools, creates new hierarchies, and perpetuates the existing nature of power relationships although power holders and the privileged agents might be different actors.The data of the research were collected through partipant observations conducted between 2013-2015 in urban forums, parent meetings, press statements, and protests related to relocation of public schools. About 8-month of the fieldwork was in-depth involvement in a school resistance movement. Also, legal texts, media resources, and policy documents were utilized to illuminate the assumptions behind the urban school relocations and different ways in which different actors understood education with regard to space.

**Theorising the urban and urban education**

In this article, Critical Urban Theory (Brenner2009) and critical theories of education (see Robertson and Dale 2015) literature have been utilized to understand how Istanbul's current urban context has converged with education policy and the ways in which policy change and its resistance resonate with current trends around urban restructuring. Critical Urban Theory challenges the urban arguments which adopt a policy scientist stance and treat cities as spaces governed by "transhistorical" rules of social arrangements, instrumental rationality, or ideology-free decisions (Brenner2009, p.198). In contrast, it sees cities as evolving within specific contexts in which power relations play an important role and shaped by informed decisions taken with vested interests.

A large body of literature has so far dealt with the central role played by urban spaces in the contemporary political economy (Brenner and Theodore2002, 2005, Harvey 2012, Peck and Tickell 2002, Peck et al. 2009). According to this

body of inquiry, cities are active players in the realization of contemporary economic projects such as neoliberalism rather than being passively or unidirectionally influenced by them. Brenner and Theodore (2002, p.376) call the relationship between the urban and neoliberalism as a co-constitutive relationship in which "a marked urbanization of neoliberalism" has been taking place since "cities have become strategic targets for an increasingly broad range of neoliberal policy experiments, institutional innovations, and politico ideological projects" (p.376).

A similar conceptualization of neoliberal institutional restructuring that involves "mutually related elements within a dynamic, dialectical process, rather than (…) distinct temporal units within a linear transition" (p.363) can be suggested for urban education policy research. While schools as educational institutions and school buildings as entities with material value are being shaped by urban processes occurring around them, they have the capacity to shape their surrounding and the way urban processes play out. The urban and educational in the relationship are not reducible to, but constitutive of one another. For instance, modern school buildings can be the manifestation of the power of a particular system or political group in the city (Bilgi2014); or neighborhood schools can bind particular populations to particular urban spaces (Gulson 2011, Lipman 2011a& 2011b, Pedroni 2011),be rebranded to market the district to middle-class consumers (Cucchiara 2008), or consigned to decay first and then closed in order to facilitate the reclamation and gentrification of their surrounding (Arrastia 2007, Means 2008). To give another example, the existence of secular public schools in desirable parts of the city and the nature of education provided in these schools might have implications for the reproduction of the conditions of existence and capital accumulation strategies of a neoliberal-Islamist government. Here, a helpful conceptualization would be "the moment of politics of education", which "is fundamentally concerned with

both political-economic structures, and deeply embedded cultural/ civilizational/ national structures and discourses, with individuals and institutions occupying varying positions in those social structures dependent upon the conditions at play" (Robertson and Dale 2015, p. 156). This does not determine the whole context of the moment of education policy but establishes basic limits to what can be expected from education and what is possible through it.

**Initial attempts at relocating inner city schools**

A recent issue for urban schools has been the relocation of inner city schools with high land value to other areas of the cityi. According to Altaylı (2009, "Çankaya'ya site, para. 1") this was not a novel idea but proposed in the mid-1980s by the then prime minister of Turkey, Turgut Özal, who said:

> The best spots in Istanbul have been occupied by schools. Let's sell these and make money. With some of the money we get, we could build nice campuses for these schools outside the city. And the rest would be revenues [for the state] (Özal, cited in Altayli 2009, "Çankaya'ya Site", para. 1).

Özal's idea of making money out of school buildings met with public reaction and therefore was not actualized (Altaylı 2009). However, there was revived interest in school buildings with the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP), who came to power in 2002, to rule without coalition. In 2006, the issue of selling school buildings made the headlines of newspapers (see "1 Yerine 10 Okul" 2006, Kireçci 2006). Print media reported that initially eight schools in Istanbul, in neighborhoods with high real estate prices, were put up for sale to generate millions and the revenue from the sales would be used to build new schools in areas lacking them (Kireçci 2006). In 2009, the press leaked the news from the traditional annual meeting of the ruling party that there was consensus around the plan of selling 45 schools in upscale neighborhoods of Istanbul

(Uçar 2009). At the time, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) stated that the news in some media did not reflect the reality, that they had no ongoing projects on selling schools which were actively providing education services or those that were under the status of historical building (MoNE Press Release 2009). Also, the MoNE stated that only the schools situated in areas that lost the residential district character would be included in such a plan (MoNE Press Release 2009). To counter the reactions and allegations that this was unlawful, the then Mayor of Istanbul explained in 2009 that with the amendment in 2008 to the National Education Basic Act No. 1739, school buildings which were deemed to be not "needed" could be sold with the approval of MoNE ("Istanbul'un tarihi okulları" 2009). In 2010, 22 schools in central locations of Istanbul were reported to have been put for sale ("Okul satislarina protesto" 2010). Although MoNE did not explicitly mention any schools, Istanbul MoNE (Istanbul Milli Eğitim Müdürlügü) Director stated that they had a plan to barter schools in central locations in return for many more schools in other parts of the city (Ögünç 2010). The Director also stated that this process would be realised via the Mass Housing Administration (Ögünç 2010), which has been restructured by JDP governments as a powerful real estate developer and is now one of the most influential actors in establishing a neoliberal regime (Bartu-Candan and Kolluoglu 2008). In 2011, three schools in one of the most exclusive districts of Istanbul – one vocational school, one girl's school, and one lycee (catchment-based enrollment high school)- were reported to have been sold clandestinely to the Mass Housing Administration ("TOKI'nin Etiler harekatı" 2011). Although the number of schools in for-sale list appeared to be twenty-two as of 2011, the then leader of an initiative called Don't Touch My School (DTMS), Nebat Bükrek, announced in a protest that the number was far higher. Bukrek also stated in the interview she gave for this research in 2012 that the issue was closely linked to Istanbul's neoliberal urban transformation. Although many school communities believe that their schools will soon be sold

and see it as inevitable, no solid plans regarding sales have yet been proposed. The plan for mass selling is not yet politically palatable, but many schools have relocated since then due to earthquake re-strengthening schemes, some of which did not start years after evacuations, and new administrative changes in the schooling system.

Since 2006, when the news first broke, school relocation issue has become far more complicated and entangled with the cultural character of transformation of education in Turkey and transformation of Istanbul. Law No 6287, which changed the primary schooling system has brought about a massive reorganisation of school spaces and become intertwined with urban restructuring processes in some districts of Istanbul. As "schools are so often defined by their immediate social environment, the social geography of cities and their larger metropolitan regions exerts a telling effect on education" (Rury and Mirel 1997, p.50). This in mind, the study described in this paper examines the intertwining of neoliberal urbanism and education policy in Istanbul and argues that the way this interaction plays out further destabilises public schools and creates new hierarchies as well as perpetuating the existing nature of power relationships.

**Convergence of urban transformation and education policy change**

Urban transformation in particular areas of Istanbul has become entangled with transformation of education. This interaction has further destabilized public schools because uncertainty and chaos induced by urban transformation facilitated the implementation of the new compulsory primary schooling reform and high school conversion policy. Moreover, a two-way relationship was evidently the case for some schools since changes brought about by the new educational arrangements and the accompanying chaos and uncertainty made it easier to generate commercial value out of some school spaces.

### *Destabilisation of public schools*

A significant example of destabilization of public schools as a result of the complex interaction between urban transformation and education policy can be presented from Kalimni. Kalimni[ii] (district centre) was widely known as a middle-class district and one of the popular urban centers of Istanbul. Most of the neighborhoods in Kalimni were planned, but it also had squatter housing neighborhoods where most homeowners had tenure security. Both state-led and contractor-initiated urban transformation projects in different neighborhoods of Kalimni facilitated the destabilization process of public schools. Elmatepe, a squatter housing neighborhood in Kalimni, was in a strategic junction due to its proximity to the Bosphorous Bridge and downtown Kalimni, which made it a highly desirable spot for investors. When zoning plans changed for Elmatepe in 2011 for earthquake-based urban regeneration, landowners started to sign agreements with construction companies for flat-for-land based construction projects (Çamlıbel et al. 2015). In 2013, the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization stopped all construction in Elmatepe and declared it "risk area" (Çamlıbel et al. 2015). While some of the landowners had already signed agreements prior to 2013 decision and moved out of the neighborhood, some were still living in the neighborhood amidst demolished houses waiting to be rebuilt. Not all landowners were willing to sign construction deals with companies as they were vaguely informed in the deals as to the exact nature of the project and their demands were not legally guaranteed in the agreements. Some landowners were forced to sign the deals as they were misinformed or threatened with expropriation. Those who resisted signing the agreements until the last moments faced expropriation ("Fikirtepe'de Ilk Kamulastirma" 2014). The transformation of the area followed a chaotic course and is still underway as of the writing of this paper. This chaos in terms of urban transformation had implications for the schools in the vicinity, which in turn had implications for

other schools in a chainlike fashion. Figure 1 illustrates part of the complex relationship between Kalimni District Center public school relocations.
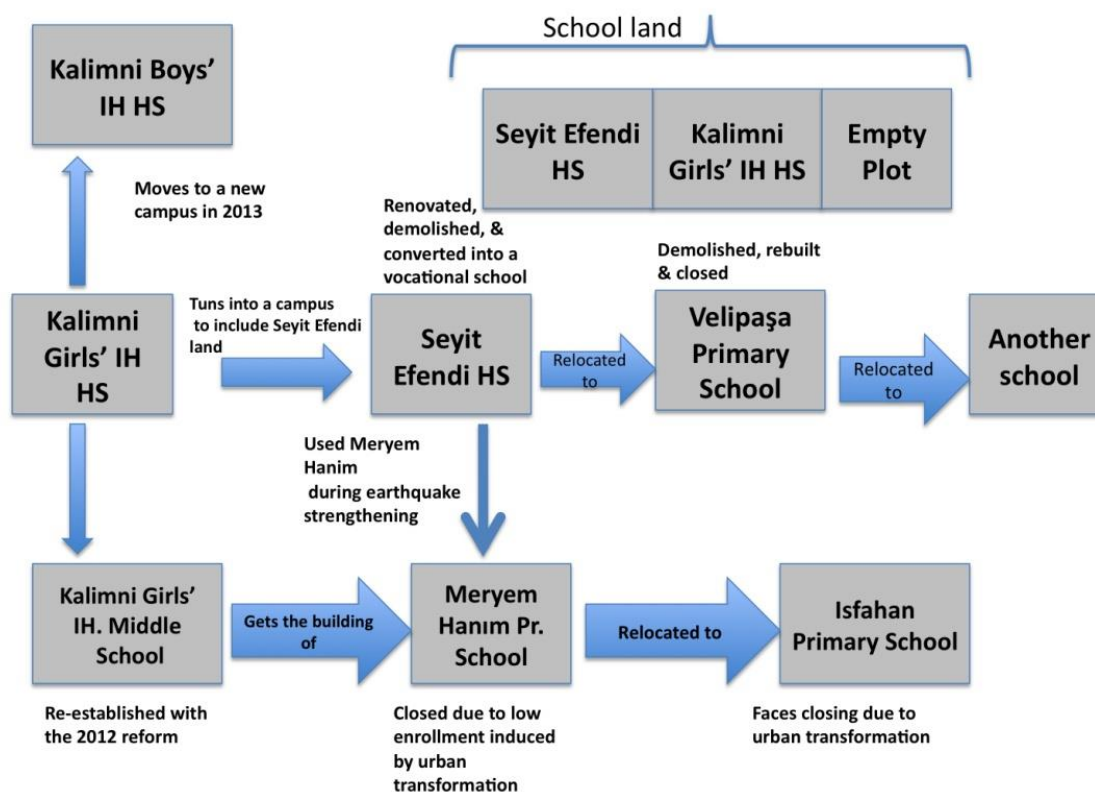


Figure 1. Relocation map of Kalimni District Centre schools[iii].

One of the repercussions of the urban transformation was that changes in the population dynamics in Elmatepe and its vicinity created the perfect pretext for decision makers to easily relocate and transform public schools. Population of Elmatepe significantly decreased due to the demolishment of houses, and construction did not start for a long time due to official ambiguities and problems between homeowners and contractors. During this process, Velipasa Primary School in Elmetepe was demolished and its remaining students were transferred to another school in a nearby neighborhood in Kalimni. While the area was replete with demolished houses, a new school building was erected on its land, but not for Velipasa Primary School. Meanwhile, a co-educational

catchment enrollment high school, which was about four kilometers away, was converted into a girls' vocational high school and then relocated to this new school building. Although parents of both schools, Velipasa and the converted co-educational high school, named Seyit Efendi High School, were unhappy with their relocation, they were not able to come together and change the new arrangement. The discussion of Seyit Efendi case in the next section will illuminate some of the reasons for the failure.

Urban transformation and its uncertainties had repercussions not only for schools in Elmatepe but also for those in neighboring areas that had students from Elmatepe but where urban transformation was not that imminent yet. For instance, the case of Meryem Hanim Primary School (PS) sits at the nexus of urban transformation, neglect of state schools, and selective support for particular educational groups. Meryem Hanim (PS) was about three kilometers from Velipasa. The student population of Meryem Hanim PS decreased due to both urban transformation in Elmatepe and the school being converted into a primary school after the Law No 6287, which replaced in 2012 the 8-year uninterrupted compulsory primary schooling with a 4+4+4 model. With the new system, primary schools (*ilkogretim okulu* [grades 1-8]) were divided into primary schools (grades 1-4) and middle schools (grades 5-8), which had to be in separate buildings. Since the law was passed hurriedly, without sufficient planning or of public consensus, existing school buildings and facilities were not ready for this rapid change. Hence, existing primary school buildings would be reconfigured to be used either as a primary school or a middle school. As middle school sections (grades 5-8; ages 10-13) of religious schools (hereafter *Imam Hatip*[iv] schools), which were closed in 1997, were re-opened with the new system, some primary schools were transformed into Imam Hatip (IH) middle schools. In some cases, Imam Hatip middle schools opened just after the new law had to use the buildings of regular middle schools since they had only the

first graders. Meryem Hanim PS had a new and large building, which it could no longer fill up. It had lost most of its population as middle schoolers moved to another school and students coming from Elmatepe moved out of the neighborhood. The new catchment arrangement did not allow for filling the building, which constituted a justification for MoNE to allocate some of the school building to other schools. In 2012-2013 academic year, Meryem Hanim PS started to share its building with Seyit Efendi HS, for the buildings of Seyit Efendi HS and the adjacent Kalimni Girls' Imam Hatip HS were being strengthened against earthquake. First, the renovation of Kalimni Girls' Imam Hatip HS building started, and they used Seyit Efendi HS building that was vacated by Seyit Efendi students relocated to Meryem Hanim PS. In 2013-2014 academic year, Meryem Hanim PS started to share its building with the middle school section of an Imam Hatip School called Kalimni Imam Hatip Middle School[v]. In 2014-2015, Meryem Hanim PS kept sharing its building with Kalimni Imam Hatip Middle School, but as the number of students at Kalimni Imam Hatip increased, some of Meryem Hanim PS students were moved to another school named Isfahan. This aroused some reaction among the parents of Meryem Hanim as they had to travel longer distances and there were problems with transportation. Also a small group among the parents suspected that the school would be totally converted into an Imam Hatip middle school and they would never be able to return to their schools. However, the MoNE denied the claims of conversion and made vague explanations, which left opposing parents and neighborhood activists in an uncertainty as to how to react and organise. The following conversation from a meeting of parents and teachers from Meryem Hanim, Kalimni community activists, and education unionists points to the way public schools were left to create their own resources and solutions in the face of urban transformation and dispossession and how selective support mechanism for certain schools operates:

**Parent 1 from Meryem Hanim:** I talked to the Kalimni MoNE Director. He said, "The school [Meryem Hanim] has a capacity of 1500 students. Current number of your school is 345. I cannot allocate the whole school for such a small number. If you find the number to fill up the school, you can get your school back. Because of urban transformation, there is a drop in the number of students". We don't even know what's gonna happen in Isfahan [school where Meryem Hanim students were sent].

**Parent 2:** Nobody knows what's going to happen to Isfahan either. There's uncertainty due to urban transformation. Maybe Isfahan will be closed in a couple of years too.

**Teacher (from Meryem Hanim):** I talked with the *moctar*[vi]. (….)

**Kalimni resident:** The moctar told me that they [MoNE] have converted the school [Meryem Hanim] into an Imam Hatip middle school. They were enrolling students in July. (....)

**Teacher:** They changed the catchment area for the school. Halem students can no longer enrol in Meryem Hanim. We should try to change the catchment area back to its previous form.

**Parent 3:** But ninety percent of the current residents [of this neighborhood] would be happy with the school having been converted into an Imam Hatip [middle school].

**Parent 2:** Do you know why? Because they provide transportation, food, and clothes. Everything they need. (....)

**Parent 1:** We should find a way of increasing the student population of our school. But there's urban transformation. Only old people have remained where I live now.

**Union activist:** Should we demand Cobble [a nearby school converted into an Imam Hatip middle school] back? They can merge two schools here, and we can get Cobble in return for Meryem Hanim.

**Parent:** But not all parents can easily get to Cobble. Some are living far from there.

**Teacher:** But Halem is packed. (….) We need to find a way of not losing our schools.

**Parent:** We don't have a primary school in our neighborhood [there's no rationale for closing or relocating it].

　　　　(....)

**Activist:** They don't care whether you have a primary school in the neighborhood or not. But they are carrying out urban transformation in a way to encourage the new comers to attend Imam Hatip schools.

**Kalimni resident**: But those who come after the transformation will be of much higher income status.

**Activist:** But green capital [Islamic capital] will come. They might be willing to attend Imam Hatip schools.

 (....)

**Parent:** I said to the MoNE Kadıköy Director that I preferred this school because my house is in its vicinity. I am a working woman. I don't want to send my child to school with a school bus. (....) He said to me, you have 320 students there, the school has a capacity of 1500. We cannot allocate it to you.

**Kalimni resident**: We should visit houses one by one and explain to them that we do not need an Imam Hatip school. (....)

**Activist:** People send their kids due to poverty. Last year, they used to send lunch to the teachers of Imam Hatip but not to the teachers of Meryem Hanim.

**Researcher:** Who's providing the food?

**Parent 3:** The municipality (Fieldnotes, September 2015)


As it is evident in the above conversation that we witnessed during one of the meetings organized in order to develop solutions to the problems of Meryem Hanim PS, parents and urban activists were helpless in the face of decreasing student population triggered by urban transformation and new school reform as well as indifference of MoNE authorities. They were trying to prevent the closure of a primary school in the neighborhood, but urban transformation was given as an excuse by MoNE authorities for decreasing student numbers, and parents were told to increase student population of the school, although this is in no way a community responsibility in the very centralized Turkish education system. Also, the conversation makes it clear that MoNE changed the catchment of the school in a way to limit its population. The claims of the parents that they would never be able to get their schools back turned out to be true: in 2015-2016 academic year, Meryem Hanim PS building was given to Kalimni Imam Hatip Middle School and Meryem Hanim PS was closed.

***Urban value extraction and destabilization of secular public education***

Seyit Efendi High School (HS) community was disquieted by the school's conversion into a vocational school and its relocation to a neighborhood undergoing intensive urban transformation, linking this rapid change to urban transformation in their neighborhood and new education reforms. Arcadia Neighborhood, where Seyit Efendi was located, was a middle-class neighborhood witnessing increasing land prices in the past few years, and contractor-initiated flat-for-land based construction was underway. While some homeowners had the chance to get new houses in return for their old dwellings, some were bewildered by the rapid change they were witnessing. Since legal consent of a certain percentage of residents was required for the contractor to redevelop a particular building or area, dissenting voices created conflict between the residents of housing complexes. Furthermore, some construction companies or contractors pestered the residents and in most cases misinformed them about legal procedures in order to persuade them into signing the construction deals. Established by a group of parents and neighborhood residents in order to prevent their school's conversion and relocation, Seyit Efendi HS Solidarity claimed that their school's closure was linked to this troublesome nature of urban transformation process in the neighborhood as well as the new high school reform that closed catchment-based schools and introduced a central high school placement exam. Seyit Efendi HS was contiguous with Kalimni Girls' Imam Hatip High School.

The land on which Seyit Efendi HS and Kalimni Girls' Imam Hatip HS were situated was composed of three tracts, two of which were covered up by two schools while one was vacant. The entire land belonged to a foundation established by a private construction contractor and held the land ownership of the school. Seyit Efendi HS community was told that this foundation gave the

rights of the land to the MoNE and a dormitory would be constructed on the land for the students of Kalimni Girls' Imam Hatip HS.

Relying on the information they gathered, Seyit Efendi HS Solidarity claimed that rent generation was also involved in the school's relocation, publicized it, and asked in their petitions to official authorities what would happen to the empty one-third of the school land. They were given vague or irrelevant answers to almost all of their petitions, or some of the petitions were not accepted claiming "missing documents". Their claims concerning rent generation were publicly denied by official authorities many times; however, allegations of the Solidarity would be vindicated at the end of a three-year process. It turned out in the end that the empty land was given back to the association and the status of the land had been changed to permit private development.

That Seyit Efendi HS Solidarity components believed the school relocation had to do with rent generation was visible in their press releases and discussions in the meetings. Almost all press releases included statements on the new compulsory schooling system, followed by statements on urban transformation in the neighborhood. The following excerpt has been taken from the press release of April 2014:

> Is there a demand for an Imam Hatip School in Arcadia? If the neighborhood residents are demanding the Imam Hatip School, then why build a dormitory? Why is the Ministry of Education allocating so much of its budget to Imam Hatip Schools? Are Seyit Efendi High School students being displaced to make a dormitory for the Girls' Imam Hatip School or to create rent for construction companies? Do not our children have the right to continue their education in the place where they started, thinking that they were enrolling in a mainstream high school? (April 6, 2014).

Seyit Efendi HS community believed that the removal of the neighbourhood school was related to the commodification of the urban sphere one the one hand; while on the other, they saw the school as a constitutive element of their surrounding and believed its removal had implications beyond the removal of a building. They believed that the long-term repercussion of the school's removal would be the transformation of the neighbourhood and displacement of the traditional middle-class residents. This was not only the claim of Seyit Efendi HS Solidarity, but it was a shared concern of urban activists from Kalimni as well as school activists from other parts of Istanbul. Such a concern points to a co-constitutive, rather than a unidirectional, relationship between school relocations and urban transformation. Research by Lipman (2011) and Pedroni (2011) point to the same relationship in the context of Chicago and Detroit, arguing that neighbourhood schools of communities of colour can function as anchors of the local community and their closure, triggered in part by neoliberal urban restructuring, can prepare the ground for the transformation of the neighbourhood.

Seyit Efendi HS case also exemplifies how public schools are destabilised through conversion and relocation accompanied by selective neglect. As stated earlier, Seyit Efendi HS and the adjacent Kalimni Imam Hatip HS buildings underwent earthquake strengthening successively, the former one sharing the building of Meryem Hanim PS during this span of time. Meanwhile the co-educational Kalimni Imam Hatip High School had become a single-sex school as boys moved to a large new campus (Figure 1) and Seyit Efendi HS was converted to girls' technical vocational school. This meant closure of Seyit Efendi HS. The common practice in case of conversion was that students were allowed to stay in the same building as the last students of a closed school until they graduated. Soon after they moved to the strengthened building of the converted school in Arcadia, they found out that it would be relocated to

Elmatepe, to a new building constructed on the land where Velipasa PS once stood. The new school was in the middle of evacuated buildings waiting to be demolished and then constructed anew. Homeless people and Syrian refugees started to dwell in the abandoned houses, with which parents were not happy. Also, landslides and construction accidents in the area aggravated the worries of the parents. Chamber of Turkish Architects and Engineers (TMMOB) inspected the area and prepared a lengthy report on the area, indicating that it was not yet suitable for education.

Also, a common belief was that the underlying motive for converting the school was to open space for an Imam Hatip school and penalise the residents - who would rather, pushing their financial situation to the limits, send their children to private schools - by depriving them of free public education.  This claim resonated with the fieldwork observations of this study, but the main reason for preferring a private school was the spatial insecurity and uncertainty created by the school's status. An urban rights activist and Seyit Efendi Solidarity member, Ercan, described the situation saying, "parents were visiting us at the solidarity desk, signing the petitions against relocation, and then they were rushing to make it to their appointments with private schools [to learn about their payment conditions]". A Seyit Efendi parent commented on the issue when I asked her which schools parents preferred after the conversion and relocation of their school as follows:

> With the recent developments and conversion of our school, many private schools have been opened recently in the neighborhood. Arcadia has a potential for this. [Telling the names of two schools]. To my knowledge, those who have the money- or some get bank credits [or resort to], similar methods- send their kids to private school if they can afford it. (...) Because there are no schools left to go. (Interview, 2016)

Parents thought that immediate transfer rate from Seyit Efendi to private schools was not high yet. According to their observations, the rate of students who left Seyit Efendi in the middle of the year and transferred to a private school was less than 10%; some would say it was around 5-6%. However, considering that transfer rate they estimated was directly related to the school's relocation and happened during the school year, it would not be untenable to claim that this was the beginning of a process that would fuel further private school enrolments. These developments were accompanied by private school incentive system that was introduced at exactly the same period when parents were disgruntled with the uncertainties of public education system.

The newly introduced incentive system that involved providing financial aid to parents who wanted to enroll their children in private schools or whose children were already attending private schools can be seen as complementary to the destabilization process described in this paper. The financial aid system was introduced in March 2014 with the additional articles to the Law No. 5580, the Law on Private Education Institutions, which was passed in 2007. On 7 August 2014, it was announced in the Official Gazette No. 29081, that starting with the 2014-2015 academic year, in line with the protocol signed between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Education, the state was to grant financial support to 250,000 students who were already attending or who wanted to enroll in a private school. Moreover, that the subject matter law came at a time when many parents were disgruntled with rapid reforms for which they were unprepared made the parents think that financial aid to private schools was paradoxical when thought against the neglected situation of public schools.

**Concluding remarks**

This paper has argued that education policy in Istanbul has converged with urban transformation in the city. Both state-led and contractor-initiated urban

transformation processes in various neighbourhoods of Istanbul facilitated the implementation of school reforms that involved sweeping reorganisation of school spaces. These changes in turn have had repercussions in the way urban transformation manifested itself in Istanbul's neighbourhoods. This paper has explained how these two processes constitute two intertwined moments facilitating the destabilisation process of secular public schools.

In the case of Istanbul, demographic changes, ambiguities, and chaos induced by urban transformation seem to facilitate the implementation of neoliberal education reforms that have proposed sweeping changes in spatial organisation of schools and in the education system itself. This claim has been substantiated through examples from Kalimni District Center, where various schools have been disrupted by urban transformation and the situation of these schools in turn have affected other schools in the neighbourhood. Decreasing enrolments in various schools caused them to be closed and be replaced by other school types. As the examples from the fieldwork suggest, the impact of urban transformation was not an inevitable outcome but came into being as a result of selective ignorance or sometimes informed calculations of policy makers.

The interaction between schools and urban transformation does not follow a unidirectional path. As explained in Seyit Efendi HS case, attempts at commercializing school spaces can be seen in neighborhoods that are experiencing urban transformation. Yet, Seyit Efendi case is not an exception; throughout the fieldwork, many students and parents voiced similar concerns about their schools, which were located in highly desirable spots and had been transformed just like Seyit Efendi HS. Moreover, changing school geography has implications for the social characteristics of neighborhoods. For example, closing or relocating secular public schools can precipitate the displacement of the residents in a particular neighborhood who are connected to the

neighborhood via its schools. In the case of Kalimni District Centre, Seyit Efendi HS in particular, school communities often voiced concerns regarding the changing cultural composition in the neighborhood. For some, school relocations concomitant with the urban transformation processes in their neighbourhood meant the displacement of the secular middle-class residents.

Educational policy can draw on geographical aspects to legitimize the restructuring of state schools, to constitute new subjects, and to reposition the schools in the education market (Gulson2007). Meryem Hanim PS case is not only an example of a secular state school being transformed into a religious school on the pretext of urban transformation; but it also shows how parents trying to resist the transformation of their school are treated as an undesired population left to submit to the new educational conditions or create their own solutions. Given that self exclusion can be a middle-class strategy at transition stages of education, albeit afforded only by those who are rich in both cultural and economic capital in the context of UK (Reay 2004), it would be tenable to reason that this new institutional structure, sitting in the nexus of urban transformation and the conservative school reform, contributes to the increasing drive towards marketisation of and stratification in education. In the light of the studies that argue parents' views regarding public schools is a key factor in shaping their school choice (see Aratemur-Çimen2015) and the claims of school communities that public schools are destabilised through various mechanisms, two of which are relocation and school closings, it is possible to suggest that middle classes will further withdraw from public education. Also, that these developments have been complemented with the recently introduced private school incentive system signals a further shift from the publicly funded comprehensive schooling as we know it[vii].This new institutional structure, where middle-class parents are denied from consensus mechanisms and encouraged to exclude themselves from public education, further encourages

them to act in pursuit of their own children's interest, which resonates with the neoliberal ideal of creating rational, profit-seeking and self-reliant individuals.

Neoliberalism is a political project targeting the reproduction of "conditions for capital accumulation and restoration of class power" (Harvey 2007, p. 29). However, that power is restored does not mean that it is the same political group of elites who seize it. Hence, the cases described in the paper show that it would be misleading to interpret the middle-class crisis as opening space for more egalitarian class relationships.

A new set of education reforms has been implemented hastily, without adequate planning or concern for the students' and teachers' educational experiences and social and economic forces that have historically shaped how they live, where they live. The emergent picture has promoted private funding of education, which is accomplished through a multiplicity of social actors, state playing an active role but also parents switching to private schools as an answer to the destabilisation of their public schools.

Consensus-building and pluralism may appear to play a very limited role in the short run. Conflicts over school spaces has taken on a new and far more contentious form with the recent conflicts over the policy of "project schools", which involves further transformations in inner city middle-class schools in Istanbul. Widespread resistance that can bring together different disgruntled groups seems distant for various reasons including, inter alia, uncritical acceptance of the nationalist education policies by the majority of the secularist block, which creates cleavages between democratic forces and civil society organizations, increased authoritarianism of the state, and cleavages between the middle-class groups who prefer exit strategy and those who opt for resistance. However, existing activism concerning education policy-making can

also be seen as a sign of the continuing failure of hegemonic state projects seeking to secure a new settlement that institutes a political-cultural formation.

**Notes**

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[i] Turkish education system is a highly centralised system where all educational institutions are bound by the same regulation and supervised by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). According to National Education Basic Act.no.1739, public school buildings are planned and built by the Ministry of National Education (MoNE). Thus, they are considered as public good. This makes it harder for policy makers to legitimise selling the school lands although it was legalised in 2008.

[ii] Almost all names in this paper are pseudonyms.

[iii] HS stands for high school; IH stands for Imam-Hatip (religious school); Pr. stands for primary.

[iv] *Imam* means prayer leader, while *hatip* means preacher in Turkish.

[v] Kalimni Imam Hatip Middle School was closed in 2001 after the 8-year uninterrupted schooling system that was ratified in 1997. The school used to be in the same building with its high school section called Kalimni Imam Hatip School, but later moved to the adjacent two-storey annex building. Upon its closure in 2001, the building was used by Seyit Efendi HS after the addition of two more floors.

[vi] Moctar is the elected government official at the neighbourhood level.

[vii] This shift may not necessarily involve retrenchment of public sources in education, but may entail redrawing the boundaries between the public and private (see Clarke 2004a; 2004b).

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