




WHY TEACHERS LEAVE TEACHING: THE CASE OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN TURKEY

ÖĞRETMENLER NEDEN MESLEĞİ BIRAKIYOR: TÜRKİYE'DE ÖZEL ÖĞRETİM KURUMLARI ÖRNEĞİ

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to uncover the reasons behind private school teachers leaving the profession. The research design was determined as a phenomenological method. For this purpose, we conducted interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of questions with 9 teachers who have either left the profession or intend to leave. We decided on nine participants for the study via the snowball sampling method. The data was obtained through face-to-face interviews and were analyzed using content analysis. As a result of the analysis, we revealed four main themes "profession-specific experiences", "experiences in private educational institutions", "opportunities", and "recommendations". At the end of the study, we concluded that the most significant reasons for teachers working in private educational institutions to leave the profession were the transformation of the profession, workload, and low salaries. We recommend improving the working conditions in private schools to prevent teachers from leaving the profession.

Keywords: Teacher Turnover, Private Schools, Qualitative Study.

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, özel okul öğretmenlerinin mesleği bırakma nedenlerini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Araştırma deseni fenomenolojik yöntem olarak belirlenmiştir. Bu amaçla, mesleği bırakmış veya bırakmayı planlayan 9 öğretmenle yarı yapılandırılmış bir anket kullanarak görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma için dokuz katılımcı kartopu örnekleme yöntemiyle belirlenmiştir. Veriler yüz yüze görüşmeler yoluyla elde edilmiş ve içerik analizi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Analizler sonucunda "meslek özelindeki deneyimler", "özel eğitim kurumlarındaki deneyimler", "fırsatlar" ve "öneriler" şeklinde dört ana tema ortaya konmuştur. Çalışma sonunda, özel eğitim kurumlarında çalışan öğretmenlerin mesleği bırakmalarının en önemli nedenlerinin mesleğin dönüşümü, iş yükü ve düşük maaşlar olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Öğretmenlerin mesleği bırakmalarını önlemek için özel okullardaki çalışma koşullarının iyileştirilmesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Öğretmen İşgücü Devri, Özel Okullar, Nitel Araştırma.

1. INTRODUCTION

A teacher in a Telegram group dedicated to sharing job postings for teachers in the private sector expressed the following message: "I believe we should consider exploring opportunities in other industries. I have recently applied for a job at Migros Market as I have lost hope in the teaching profession. Starting at a market, store, or shopping mall, gaining an understanding of market dynamics, and then pursuing a different career path appears to be a more reasonable option." Lately, there has been a noticeable increase in such messages across various teacher communication groups and social media platforms. In the private sector, it is difficult to provide clear data due to the complexity of legislation and lack of supervision, for example, there are many unlicensed institutions (Ministry of National Education (MoNE), 2024). Therefore, social media platforms, which are currently the most important source of data, provide evidence of a growing tendency for teachers to leave their positions in private education institutions. The rise in teacher turnover has become a significant concern in education systems worldwide (Cassidy et al., 2011; Nguyen, 2020).

Existing research on teachers leaving their jobs, both globally and in Türkiye, has predominantly focused on the intention to leave the job rather than the actual act of leaving. Various influential factors, such as limited job options, inadequate alternative school choices, and challenging decision-making processes, have played a critical role in determining whether teachers stay in their current organizations (Çelik, 2020). Moreover, a teacher's intention to leave the job indicates negative experiences or perceptions regarding their school and the teaching profession, making it an essential determinant. Additionally, the intention to leave has been identified as one of the most significant factors contributing to actual teacher turnover (Tekleab et al., 2015, as cited in Li & Yao, 2022).

Studies exploring the correlation between teachers' intention to leave and various variables have revealed a connection with trust (Toprak & Karakuş, 2019), professional identification, organizational commitment (Gökaslan, 2018; Esop & Timms, 2019), climate (Chambers Mack et al., 2019), job passion (Gökaslan, 2018; Boz, 2021), organizational justice, and job satisfaction (Addai et al., 2018), as well as burnout, workload, and stress (Li & Yao, 2022). These factors are considered to influence teachers' intention to leave in terms of individual and organizational aspects. In the context of Türkiye, the majority of research has been centered on teachers in public schools (Gökaslan, 2018; Çelik, 2020; Şenel & Karaca, 2022), with limited studies examining teacher turnover intention in private schools (Ağırbay, 2018; Boz, 2021). However, it is evident that teachers leaving their jobs are more prevalent in private schools. In Türkiye, 20% of schools are private, and 14.39% of all teachers are employed in private schools. The transformation of private tutorial centers into private schools since 2014 has further accelerated the rise in teacher employment within private institutions.

The privatization of education has given rise to various employment opportunities alongside private schools, including courses, tutoring centers, private tutoring agencies, preschools, special education and rehabilitation centers, and even private tutoring or paid teaching positions within public schools. Considering the challenges in public education and the promotion of private education through neoliberal policies, it is foreseeable that this trend will continue, leading to a further expansion of the community of teachers working in private institutions. As the private school sector grows, the absence of comprehensive legal regulations makes it impossible to establish standardized practices concerning teachers' working conditions. Consequently, it is anticipated that the working conditions of teachers compelled to

work in the private sector due to unavailability of positions in public schools will deteriorate, leading to increased teacher turnover.

1.1. Teacher Turnover

In the current neoliberal era, the work environment is characterized by low wages, flexible, and insecure employment conditions. The rise of neoliberalism has led to significant wage disparities, with individuals in the same job receiving 50 times more in one country compared to another. Moreover, differences in work accidents and occupational health and safety have also become evident (Öçal and Çiçek, 2020). In this unequal environment, where individuals are deemed responsible for their own lives, they often struggle to achieve the rewards they seek in their pursuit of a better life and work. This can lead to work-related difficulties, while the fear of unemployment prevents them from leaving their jobs until they find a better alternative. Consequently, employees who choose to stay despite negative work experiences develop negative feelings, leading to increased work stress and decreased performance. Over time, this can lead to negative emotions like burnout and ultimately culminate in the intention to leave the organization if the problems persist. Thus, the intention to leave the job contributes to an increase in employee turnover rates (Oltulu and İraz, 2022). Particularly among young teachers, the turnover rate is notably higher compared to experienced teachers, with almost 50% leaving the profession within the first five years (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Synar & Maiden, 2012; Perda, 2013; Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2016; Ryan et al., 2017; Redding & Henry, 2018).

Li and Yao (2022) have classified teachers' intention to leave their jobs into four levels: individual, interpersonal, job-related, and organizational. The individual level includes factors such as demographic variables, personality, job reactions, and physical and psychological experiences. The interpersonal level involves relationships with other employees and managers, where social support and trust play significant roles. At the job level, factors such as stress, workload, and job conditions that affect teachers' performance and satisfaction are identified. The organizational level includes aspects such as autonomy, fairness, and the overall climate of the school organization. Considering the impact of neoliberalism, it is expected that the intention to leave the teaching profession and the subsequent turnover rates will increase, as is the case in other professions.

Nguyen et al. (2020) suggest examining the reasons for leaving the job in three groups: personal factors, school-related factors, and external/political factors. Personal factors encompass teachers' demographic characteristics, experience, level of education, specialization, etc. School-related factors pertain to the organizational characteristics of the school, its resources, student structure, and demographic features. Additionally, with changes in the teacher labor market, Nguyen et al. (2020) propose the inclusion of external factors in the literature, categorizing them into accountability and workforce. Accountability includes teacher evaluation policies, teacher effectiveness, administrative effectiveness, and merit-based salary increases. Workforce factors encompass aspects such as salary, employment rate, retirement, salaries in professions other than teaching, and union membership status. While the effects of neoliberalism on society and individual life are similar in most countries, variations exist in education systems due to inequalities between countries and differences arising from the significance assigned to education and current political conditions. Therefore, it is essential to consider the unique conditions of each country separately.

1. 2. Teacher Employment in Türkiye and the Precarization of the Profession

In Türkiye, between the academic years 2021-2022, a total of 297,394 students were enrolled in education faculties. Additionally, considering the provision of teaching certificates or diplomas with pedagogical formation to graduates of other faculties, it is estimated that more than 80,000 individuals per year seek employment as teachers. In the same academic year, the Ministry of National Education reported 163,975 teachers employed in private schools, indicating a 1.1% increase compared to the previous year. In 2020, 471,506 individuals applied for the Public Personnel Selection Exam, with approximately 40,000 being assigned to public schools. This indicates that nearly 90% of teachers are compelled to work in private educational institutions. Consequently, a substantial number of teachers remain either unemployed or find alternative jobs. In Marxist terms, the continuous growth of the reserve labor force in the labor market for teachers significantly impacts the salaries and rights of teachers working in private institutions.

Legislation concerning the working conditions of teachers in private educational institutions is not as explicit as in public schools. While the Law on Private Educational Institutions No. 5580 primarily regulates educational activities, teachers are subject to Labor Law No. 4857, which governs their working conditions, workload, responsibilities, and employment rights in the private sector. This situation indicates a lack of clarity in the legislation regarding the legal status of teachers (Çiçek, 2009). The recent enactment of the Teacher Profession Law in 2022, which solely addresses the status of teachers working in public schools, implies that the ambiguity in the status of teachers working in private educational institutions will persist.

According to Standing (2014), neoliberalism and globalization have led to unemployment, flexibility, and precarious employment in the labor market, resulting in the emergence of a new class known as the precariat. Members of the precariat experience a life of insecurity and face pressures that lead to an absence of a secure identity or a sense of development obtained through work or lifestyle (Standing, 2014: 36). While some critics argue that the concept of precariat does not offer anything new and lacks a comprehensive Marxist class analysis, it nevertheless aims to cover up the Marxist theory, albeit without introducing novel ideas (Oğuz, 2011; Hacısalihoğlu, 2015; Oran, 2015). Regardless of the need for further advancement in these debates, it is generally acknowledged that Standing's concept of the precariat is applicable to studies conducted on teacher labor in Türkiye.

Dağ (2020) points out that in a standardized education system worldwide, teaching, now expected to fulfill only the required performance, has become a profession subject to precarization, resulting in reduced weight in the education process due to technological advancements. Teachers employed under precarious conditions, such as those who are not assigned and may lose their jobs when permanent teachers are available, experience alienation from their labor (Dali, 2017) and face significant concerns about their future (Yağan, 2022). The precarization conditions of such teachers not only affect their work lives but also lead to fragmented individual lives (Sağıroğlu, 2013). Although precarization also affects teachers in public schools, the situation is much different in private schools. The fixed-term contract is already the most important evidence of job insecurity. Moreover, in private courses, contracts are not for one year but for ten months. Teachers do not receive salaries when schools are closed. In the employment contracts with teachers in private schools, salaries are calculated based on the number of hours taught. Therefore, teaching is understood only as attending classes. Teachers are expected to work outside the classroom to improve themselves, but they are not paid for this. Therefore, it can be said that the most decisive characteristic of teacher

precarization is the lack of salary compensation for the work and preparation that teachers do outside of school and the lack of salary payment during the time when classes are not being taught. However, preparation periods outside of school are one of the most critical parts of the educational process.

Furthermore, there are studies that, while not directly examining precarization, focus on the situation of teachers working in private institutions. It has been observed that coping methods for dealing with mobbing in private schools include finding a middle ground with school management, trying to get along, ignoring, keeping silent, approving, and doing all tasks without questioning (Şahin, 2022). Tüzel (2019) concludes that teachers working in private schools are exposed to psychosocial risk factors such as burnout, and simultaneously, a significant number of teachers find their profession sustainable and express a desire to work for many years. However, there are also studies suggesting that teachers working in private schools continue their employment due to the fear of unemployment, and the reason for their employment in private schools is the inability to be assigned to public schools (Uğraş, 2009; Yılmaz & Altinkurt, 2011; Demirer, 2012; Sağiroğlu, 2013; Çimen & Karadağ, 2020). According to Boz (2021), passion for work and job satisfaction negatively affect the intention to leave among teachers working in private schools, and meeting the expectations of talented teachers with the potential to succeed is crucial to eliminate the intention to leave. Given the conditions of neoliberalism, it becomes necessary to consider who these potentially successful teachers are and how they can be identified.

In recent years, as teacher turnover has increased worldwide, the number of studies on this subject has also risen. Research has revealed that there are numerous personal, school-related, and external reasons for leaving or intending to leave the teaching profession. The prevailing consensus is that the increase in teacher turnover indicates teachers' dissatisfaction with their work.

This study aims to examine the experiences and perspectives of teachers who have left or intend to leave the teaching profession. The act of teachers not only changing schools but also leaving the profession has significant consequences for both society and individuals, including the squandering of the education invested in becoming a teacher and a complete redirection of plans. Notably, there is a dearth of literature exploring the reasons and processes behind the "loss of hope" in the teaching profession, as mentioned in the Telegram message. Furthermore, there is a lack of research delving into how teachers make sense of their desire to leave the profession and their experiences related to this decision. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to gain insights into the experiences of teachers working in private schools regarding their inclination to leave the profession. Our main research question is: 'why do teachers working in private schools leave the profession?' The study will investigate the experiences of teachers who have left or intend to leave the teaching profession. The research will address the following questions:

1. How do teachers who intend to leave or have left the teaching profession interpret their experiences?
2. What are the experiences of teachers working in private educational institutions?
3. What are the underlying reasons that drive teachers to consider leaving the teaching profession?

The findings of this study are anticipated to enhance the understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by teachers in private schools, as well as to inform the development of policies aimed at improving their working conditions.

2. METHOD

2. 1. Design

This research follows a phenomenological research approach. Phenomenological studies aim to describe the meaning of experiences related to a concept or phenomenon, with a focus on identifying commonalities in participants' experiences concerning that phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration and description of individuals' personal perspectives. The main objective is to capture and understand participants' interpretations and understanding of social phenomena in a way that reflects their inner nature (Berg, 2001; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is the intention to leave the teaching profession. The phenomenological design entails conducting research with participants who have experienced the phenomenon. Therefore, teachers who currently work or have worked in private educational institutions and have the intention to leave the teaching profession were included in this research.

2. 2. Participants

Snowball sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, was utilized in the study. Purposive sampling involves selecting members with a specific position or type to represent a particular characteristic (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Given the phenomenological design's aim to uncover participants' experiences related to a phenomenon, it was essential to involve individuals who have experienced this phenomenon. In snowball sampling, participants being interviewed are asked for information about acquaintances who have experienced the same phenomenon, and they are encouraged to facilitate communication with these acquaintances (Berg, 2001; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Berg (2001) emphasizes that snowball sampling is a valuable approach not only in situations where selection criteria carry implicitly expressed characteristics or when references are required for conducting interviews but also in cases involving dispersed groups. Although the phenomenon of leaving the teaching profession is not a sensitive issue that would hinder interviews for those who have experienced it, this method was chosen to identify teachers who have left the profession. Since teachers who have left the profession are no longer present in schools, they were reached through currently employed teachers. Although prior participants recommended the participants, efforts were made to ensure a diverse selection of individuals from various schools to minimize bias and to avoid the risk of interviewing a group of teachers who might intend to create a negative perception of the school.

A total of 9 participants who have left the teaching profession or have the intention to do so were reached in the study. Following the interviews with nine participants, the similarity in their responses indicated that data saturation had been achieved, concluding the data collection process. The demographic characteristics of the participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Participants

Name	Age	Branch	Teaching Seniority	The number of institutions where teachers work	Situation
Nazlı	40	English	17	3	Continues
Demir	35	Science	13	2	Left
Ferit	28	Turkish Literature	0,5	1	Left
Esmâ	47	English	25	6	Left
Cangül	33	English	7	5	Left
Cemre	37	English	6	4	Left
Gözde	32	Music	5	1	Continues
Özlem	30	English	8	4	Left
Selin	39	Mathematics	15	2	Continues

As can be observed in Table 1, the participants' ages range from 28 to 47. Among the nine participants, six have already quit the teaching profession, while three have expressed their intention to do so. The participants comprise five English teachers and four specialized in Mathematics, Turkish Language and Literature, Music, and Science, respectively. Their teaching experience spans from 6 months to 25 years, and they have worked in 1 to 6 different schools during their careers. The participants were selected on a voluntary basis, and to safeguard their personal information, their real names were not used in the article. Phenomenological studies investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences and strive to understand them in depth. To facilitate the understanding of this individuality, it was preferred to use pseudonyms for participants instead of assigning codes.

2.3. Data Collection Procedures

In this study, data were collected using a form consisting of semi-structured questions. According to Stake (2010), the purpose of the interview for qualitative researchers is not only to gather numerical information but also to obtain unique knowledge and insights held by the interviewee, to learn something that researchers cannot access, and to observe individuals. The interview should be conducted in a conversational style with in-depth questions to clarify and enhance the information and insights. For this purpose, the interview should include a small number of structured and generally open-ended questions (Creswell, 2007). After conducting a literature review, the interview questions were reviewed and approved by two experts, and necessary changes were made. Ethics committee approval was obtained from the relevant university on December 27, 2022, with the approval number 2022.12. Pilot interviews were conducted to revise the questions, and their appropriateness was confirmed. In addition to the primary research questions, probing questions were incorporated during the interviews. Each interview was recorded on video and subsequently reviewed by the other authors.

An interview protocol was prepared, including the research purpose and significance, the content, duration, and method of the interview, and assurance of the protection of personal information. The protocol was sent to the participants via email. Participants were provided with a protocol that outlined the voluntary nature of the interview, assured them of the confidentiality of their identities, and informed them of their right to withdraw. This information was also reiterated verbally at the beginning of the interview. In qualitative research, the interview method is questioned as an imbalance of power between the interviewer and the interviewee (Stake, 2010). This power imbalance can lead to participants withholding information and researchers violating ethical rules. However, it is believed that the fact that the

interviewer is also a teacher, having personal acquaintance with two participants, and the use of snowball sampling invalidate the questioned power imbalance.

The interviews were conducted individually face-to-face and online through the Zoom application, lasting an average of 40 minutes. In face-to-face interviews, with the participants' consent, voice recordings were made, and online interviews were recorded. Notes were taken during the interviews. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and sent to the participants for verification. Once transcribed and approved by the participants, the recordings were deleted.

2. 4. Data Analysis

The transcribed interview recordings underwent content analysis, a method that involves coding, categorizing, establishing relationships between categories, and deriving theoretical findings from the text (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Berg (2001) describes content analysis as suitable for exploratory and descriptive studies, as it allows researchers to listen to the content's words and better understand the perspective of the content producer. Inductive coding was applied when analyzing the data. Inductive coding is more suitable for qualitative research (Creswell, 20017). To ensure reliability, the interview recordings were individually reviewed by the researchers, and consensus was reached on the themes and categories.

3. FINDINGS

In the research aimed at understanding the processes that lead teachers to the point of leaving the profession, four themes emerged in parallel with the interview questions. These themes were shaped as "profession-specific experiences," "experiences in private educational institutions," "opportunities," and "recommendations".

3.1. Theme One: Profession-specific Experiences

Profession-specific experiences' theme revealed the participants' perceptions of the teaching profession and its development. Within this theme, categories of enjoyment, insignificance, and disillusionment have emerged. All participants, except for Cemre, Güzde, and Esmâ, stated that they wanted to become teachers since their middle and high school years. The aspect of teaching that involves shaping students as individuals, in addition to academic achievement, was mentioned by all participants. All participants expressed a fondness for and enjoyment of the teaching profession. They described experiencing pleasure from interacting with children and satisfaction from influencing students' development. Regarding the love for the profession, Demir says:

I can say that I had a better time with the younger ones. I could teach and do experiments with them. We played ball together, had fun. They have this crazy kind of fun. I think I was able to show the ability to be a child with the child. I could catch that frequency with them.

Güzde, who enjoys spending time with children, has put in extra effort in teaching:

I can't get along with adults, but I can get along better with children. I love talking to children. Even during the pandemic, let's say I have a class for one hour. We are at home, free, and I was doing a three-hour lesson. We were chatting and studying. So, I love spending time with them. But I didn't do it for praise. Teaching someone something is such a beautiful thing. I also learn while teaching. Because our things to learn are limitless. We have a beautiful profession, and I see some children as my siblings. I love them so much that I feel very sad when they graduate. Will I never see them again? These are very different emotions.

A gradual shift from satisfaction to a sense of insignificance was reported by participants as the teaching profession underwent transformation. Esma, who also served as a school principal in the later years of her career in a private school, said, *"My teachers used to ask, why are we so insignificant?"* She further explained the decrease in the value attributed to the profession, stating, *"At the beginning, the teaching profession was much more valued and of higher quality. It was preferred by more people. Of course, this is somewhat related to government policies, but I feel that it has been moving in a negative direction."*

Other participants provided examples by comparing previous years. Selin used the phrase *"lost its standing"* to describe the decline in the value of teaching. Cangül expressed this situation as, *"As long as schools are seen as commercial enterprises and students are seen as customers, we are reduced to being mere cashiers."* Nazlı, who was in her 17th year of teaching, mentioned that teaching had turned into babysitting:

In recent years, teaching has turned from educating into babysitting. We always talk about this among ourselves. Teaching has become about taking care of and meeting the physical needs of children, managing them within certain hours of the day, and then handing them over to their parents. During that time, we try to practice our profession if we can, but it was never like this in the early years.

The analogy of being a babysitter is also used by Özlem:

It's not about being a teacher, it's about being like a babysitter, you have to be with them for more than 40 minutes. Even if the lesson is empty, the students cannot be left without a teacher. A teacher is assigned, so you have to go there. Whether you teach or not doesn't matter. But you can't leave them for those 40 minutes. It's like being a babysitter, whether I teach or not doesn't matter much. I have to spend that time with them.

Cemre explains how they are equated with other school staff: *"Our schools are belittled, our knowledge is nullified. I don't underestimate it, but we are equated with the cleaning staff at school. Your attitude, attire, communication, classroom management, communication with students, raising the students' performance graph, none of these matter."*

Within this theme, another category that emerged is disillusionment. Although teachers initially enjoy their profession, they start to experience disillusionment after a while. Cemre states, *"Teaching in Türkiye is not really teaching. I quit because I became completely disillusioned with these things. They turned me off from the profession, maybe due to my age, my tolerance may have decreased."*

Selin describes her disillusionment with the profession as follows:

I no longer enjoy teaching something, perhaps because money became involved. Children are more insatiable now. At least there were children who were willing to receive and could benefit from what I taught. Now, I'm experiencing this problem. It makes me very uneasy. A teacher comes, let the teacher come and go. Yes, the result? They don't need to do anything because next year they will continue in another private school. The following year, they will move on to a job, so it feels like the value of the education I provide has diminished, that's how I feel.

Within the first theme, it becomes apparent that teaching as a profession is initially chosen and perceived very positively, not as an ordinary job but as a profession that has an impact on students' lives. However, as a sense of insignificance accumulates over time, teachers gradually experience disillusionment and reach a point where they consider leaving the profession.

3. 2. Theme Two: Experiences in Private Educational Institutions

The second theme focuses on the experiences in private educational institutions. The categories that emerged in this context include *the state of the sector, relationships, workload, pressure to engage in activities other than teaching, and salary*.

Cangül describes the state of the sector as *“established purely to fill the pockets of the owners”* while Cemre characterizes it as *“operating with a commercial mindset”*. Özlem also emphasizes the commercial aspect, stating, *“It functions more like a business establishment than an educational institution, from what I've observed”*. Ferit, who works in an exam preparation course, makes similar remarks, saying, *“It seemed more like the teacher was an employee and the individuals receiving the service were the students, within the service sector”*. Selin explains why parents choose private schools, stating, *“Sometimes people say you deceive the parents, that grades are inflated in private schools. But I say you're mistaken; parents are there for that reason. They want it, many parents say so. Some even say they don't want to be deceived and ask if I'm really telling them the true grades, the real situation”*.

Regarding the *relationships* category, it is observed that parental satisfaction is the primary determinant in teacher-parent, teacher-administration, and teacher-teacher relationships. All participants stated that in private schools, the administration prioritizes fulfilling parental requests and does not support the teacher even if they are in the right during a problem. Özlem stated the following:

There were meetings, parents were coming. Firstly, they would speak with a tone that dictates what the teacher should do. Like, students start learning English in 1st grade or in preschool, if they had previous exposure. Most of my students were seeing English for the first time in that class. After a month or two had passed, they would say, *“They still haven't learned English. Why can't they learn?”* In a way that blames the teacher, saying, *“We're paying for this school; they have to learn. Otherwise, I'll take them to a public school”*. It's like giving a little bit of a threat. As if they don't want that parent to leave. As long as parent doesn't leave the school, that's enough. I started feeling like I was the one responsible... I had a lively student. The class was already difficult to manage. Suddenly, he threw his book towards my direction. I mean, he threw the book, the textbook, and it fell on the ground. Naturally, I got angry and upset with the student, and we had a dialogue like that. Even after I got angry, he continued to laugh and respond. I didn't do much about it in that moment. After that, he went to the administration, to the parent. He said, *“The teacher got mad at me in front of everyone; she insulted me. She even called me mentally disabled”*. Students can exaggerate, do wrong things, and lie. Those things happen, but in this situation, the administration told me, *“Call the parent and correct it if there has been a misunderstanding”*. The administration shouldn't have made me deal with the parent. Despite that, thinking that I didn't have anything to hide, I made the call. If I hadn't called, they might have thought, *“Is the teacher at fault?”*. When I called the parent and spoke, she said, *“My child never tells lies; I will come to the school and confront you”*. She spoke as if she was holding me accountable, even threateningly, but I still tried to maintain my composure while responding. *“Please come; I'm at school”*. The parent didn't come to the school, that's another matter. But even if she had come, I don't know what would have happened. Because in such a situation, I would have defended myself, not let myself be oppressed. Because there's an injustice being done to me... The administration even said to me at the end, *“If it doesn't work out, call the parent and apologize”*. Why should I apologize to the parent when I'm right?

The issue of teacher-parent interference is another example, as stated by Selin:

Why do we usually have parent-teacher meetings? We have them to provide information to parents about their children. When we provide this information, they often say, "Why didn't you tell me this earlier? You could have informed me". For example, there are deficiencies in their assignments. We hold parent-teacher meetings specifically to report these issues, to inform them about grades and assignments. They ask, "Why didn't you tell me before? I would have made them do it". I know they wouldn't have made them do it. In fact they couldn't have made them do it.

These examples indicate that teachers are not pleased with being meddled in their work by parents. The fact that parents constantly hold teachers accountable and that administrator always side with parents discomforts teachers. Demir, who is both a teacher and a parent at the same school, stated that he wasn't approached the same way as other parents when he had a problem with his child's teacher, and the administrators didn't resolve the issue the way he wanted. He attributed this to the fact that he himself is a teacher.

According to the participants' narratives, a sense of solidarity generally prevails in teacher-to-teacher relationships. All participants mentioned having close friendships with their colleagues at private schools. However, there were also mentions of distrust stemming from competition among teachers in other schools. For example, Cemre used the analogy of witch's *cauldron* to describe the teacher's room. Cemre said:

I have very good friends, I still keep in touch with my friends, but schools are truly like a witch's cauldron. There are teachers who trip you up, talk behind your back to the administration. You do something, and the administration calls you, saying, "You did it like this". You trusted them, you spoke with sincerity. But you have to find the right channel. The teachers' lounge is a dangerous place. You need to be careful about what you say and not talk about it in front of everyone. You need to find out who is gossiping to the administration. Otherwise, everything you say goes to the administration.

Another category that emerges within the second theme is the *workload*. Ferit mentioned that he works six days a week, from 08:30 to 18:30, which corresponds to a 60-hour workweek. Ferit works at a preparatory course where, in addition to teaching topics, there are also lessons dedicated to answering questions. Although participants working at schools have fewer teaching hours compared to the course, non-teaching activities take up more time. Among these, parent meetings seem to be the most significant. Demir described parent meetings as follows:

Within the school's chaotic environment, it's not very healthy to make parent calls. You need to find a quiet space, have a calm conversation, and each parent needs a certain amount of time to talk. For example, you allocate 10 minutes for each parent, but when you call for a 10-minute conversation, it never ends in 10 minutes. Because parents have requests, opinions, and questions, and these can drag on. I had over twenty advisory cases, sometimes even reaching twenty-four. As a result, we had to make parent calls on weekends, outside of regular working hours. Because it's impossible to keep up with the school's busy schedule. Additionally, you need to find a space, sit down and have a conversation, have the data in front of you. You need your documents or have the data on the computer to evaluate. Many of us ended up sacrificing a lot of our personal time by making these calls on weekends, which should be reserved for our own families.

In private schools, there are various activities besides teaching hours and parent meetings. For example, Özlem, an English teacher, mentioned that they prepare students for the Cambridge

exam. Gözde, the music teacher, stated that they prepare for a music night event. Nazlı, an English teacher at the primary school level, mentioned that she prepared a dance performance for the children for the April 23rd event. Nazlı expressed the impact of preparing boards for specific days and weeks on workload, saying, *“Teachers are required to prepare boards, even if it is not essential. Due to the request of the administration, extra working hours need to be devoted to creating those boards. Sometimes this work exceeds regular working hours, causing teachers to stay at school”*.

Another factor that increases workload is trying to fill in for a teacher who is absent. Özlem described this situation as follows:

When my colleague left, I started doing her/him tasks alone, including grading exams. I also had to take the exams that she/he was supposed to administer. Since we have listening sections in exams, I visit each classroom and conduct listening activities for English exams. I already have my own class, and I have to visit five or six other classes individually. In addition to that, I had to cover her/him classes. It was a busy day for me. Excluding substitute lessons and tutorials, we already teach around 32-33 hours, which I think is too much.

Apart from workload, another category that emerged within the second theme is the compulsion to engage in activities outside of teaching. Teachers are required to participate in non-academic activities at school. For example, Cemre shared her experiences regarding such situations:

We were constantly rushing from one costume to another at school, it was terrible. When I did these activities, it was about three years ago when I was 33-34 years old. I didn't want to do these things, but I was at the primary school level. Jumping around like a monkey, wearing this costume, that sock day, this event... We are not actors just because we are teachers. I don't have to entertain children... There is an activity every day, and for some reason, this seems to be the fate of English teachers. I can even send you pictures. Did I not become an old lady in the pictures? Did I not become a witch or a princess? These things are imposed on you; you don't have the right to choose... I have fought against this many times, *“I don't want to do it. I don't want to wear those costumes. I don't want to turn into a theater director here. I want to teach my lessons. I don't want to dress up and go shopping for materials for some activity every day”*. You are cutting and sewing things every day... The academic calendar is not explained to you. It's not said that it will be like this, you will wear these, you will do this, you have this day. Nothing is said. After signing the contract, you are exposed to those activities once the term starts. For example, it's pizza day, and we make pizza at the door. It's sock day, so we make and hang socks. It's the 100th day, so you come dressed like a grandmother.

Gözde, who is a music teacher, explains that besides preparing her students for a music performance, she is being forced by the administration to sing against her will. She expresses it as follows: *“I am a teacher. I teach my students, and my students perform. That's how I see it. I believe I don't need to sing and deceive people's eyes. Because, as I said, I am a teacher, not an artist. However, despite that, they don't care and want me to come out and perform a solo”*.

In addition to these factors, some teachers work at a second job due to low salaries. Participants Demir and Cangül stated that they work at a course on weekends outside of school. Gözde, on the other hand, gives private lessons during her free time outside of school.

One of the categories that emerges in the second theme is *salary*. Nazlı, who is in her 17th year of teaching, explains the impact of decreasing salary over time on her dedication to the profession as follows:

Living conditions have become very difficult in recent years. But our income, our salaries, did not increase proportionally, of course. Therefore, it naturally decreased one's psychological attachment to the profession. No matter how much effort, no matter how much one loves their profession, unfortunately, as the purchasing power and the ability to survive in life decrease, the passion for the profession also diminishes. At least that's how I feel. But it wasn't like that in the early years; at least we had very few difficulties in terms of making a living.

Demir, who is in his 13th year of teaching, describes the low salary as follows:

The economic conditions are so bad that they can significantly decrease a teacher's motivation, even to the extent of completely demoralizing them. We, like my colleagues with whom I work, managed to endure this problem for a while by showing resilience. However, when the conditions reached a point where we couldn't make ends meet, I had to resign.

Esma describes the financial situation of teachers by saying, *"Teachers can't manage their lives. Currently, private school teachers are in a position where they can't even afford to pay rent."* Ferit, on the other hand, shares his initial salary situation: *"Since I was a new entrant to the profession, I was receiving the minimum wage. Those who were able to negotiate better could get around five to six hundred liras more than the minimum wage"*.

Participants also point out that working in private institutions has become especially challenging, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, classes were conducted online, and the government provided a payment called Short-Term Work Allowance (SWA) to employees of businesses that were either closed or experiencing reduced activities. Teachers also received the SWA since schools were closed. The SWA payment was lower than their regular salary. Cangül describes what happened during that period as follows:

The institution caused problems with the short-term work allowance. Money started to become a financial burden, and the country's situation was also at a certain point. It was my sister who provided the biggest support at that time since I was living with her. They only gave us the short-term work allowances, and the remaining money was provided by the government. The part that completed the salary they gave was delayed.

The low salaries of private school teachers have also led to questioning the profession. Gözde says, *"I have a cousin who is the same age as me. She earns four times more than me. Four times, you know what that means? If I earn 10, she earns 40, which means she earns much more. It's like a joke; why did I become a teacher?"* Selin also adds:

We have extra duties, but we don't receive extra pay for them. Our additional lessons are determined arbitrarily; we only take additional lessons to plan our salary. We don't receive additional payment for tutorials. So, the work you do is not worth the exhaustion. People, especially those outside the profession, wonder, *"You're working for this salary?"* Yes, many teachers work for these salaries. It's not just in our school; many private schools are like this... So, when you're tired at the end of the day, what did you tire yourself for? We think about many other professions; we studied at university and pursued a master's degree. For example, I have a master's degree, I wrote a thesis. I should have received compensation for that. It should be something valuable to this institution. But it doesn't matter; such things are not important... The only thing in mind is, *"I can earn this money by working only three hours a day anyway,"* either through private lessons or in another way. Then it really loses its value, and everyone is unhappy about the salary in the teachers' room, everyone is unhappy.

Cemre believes that the notion of *holiness* attributed to the teaching profession is used to justify teachers continuing to work for low wages. She explains this situation as follows:

Teachers are not holly, and this profession is not holly either. It is purely done for the purpose of education and teaching children. So, elevating it to a holly status and disregarding teachers' desires and incomes solely for the sake of bread and butter is a way to manipulate teachers. No, it is not a holly profession. It is all about having principles, truths, and education.

In summary, regarding the experiences in private schools, the participants mention that due to the commercial mindset prevailing in schools, parents see themselves as customers and therefore do not show respect towards teachers. They also note that school administrations do not protect teachers from parents, the workload is very heavy, they are forced to undertake additional tasks and duties unrelated to teaching, and they have to make ends meet with very low wages. The decreasing salaries make it increasingly difficult to sustain the profession.

3. 3. Theme Three: Opportunities

Six of the teachers participating in the research have left the profession. All participants stated that there are numerous teachers who have the intention to quit the profession. They mentioned that teachers who find better working conditions would leave the profession without hesitation. Four out of the six teachers who participated in the study are English teachers. Being proficient in a foreign language has opened up new job opportunities for them. Özlem works as a translator in a software company and describes her new job as follows:

All I do is attend meetings, and they ask me to prepare English promotional videos. I work from home, and I have weekends off. These are definitely very good things for me right now. Working hard is not a problem for me; I know that I will work intensively in this company in the future. That's not an issue, but being able to rest, especially during the meetings, when someone speaks, I translate, and when another person speaks, I translate. It's really nice. I have breaks, I can manage my household chores because I work from home, and if I don't have a meeting, I can have free time at that moment. For example, the stress is definitely lower, and after doing the required work, until the next task, I can say that I'm free. As I mentioned, what is expected of me is to provide translation during meetings and create English promotional videos.

Demir prepares content for a digital education platform, Cemre works in an import company, Cangül has switched to the tourism sector, and Esma plans to work as an overseas education consultant. The youngest participant, Ferit, worked as a teacher for six months and then started working as a waiter in a café. Despite the demanding hours at the café, he believes that his efforts will lead him to better conditions. He describes his situation as follows:

Overall, I didn't have much trust in the education sector, and after leaving, my lack of trust only increased. But since life requires money in some way, I started working at a café in a university. I actually entered the service industry, and the process continued like this. I'm still doing the same job, and in the following process, I have planned to start my own business. In general, during the summer or so, my friend and I aim to open our own place. That's the overall plan awaiting me.

While other participants considered transitioning to professions they had prior experience in or received education for, Ferit seems to have stepped into an uncertain future.

3. 4. Theme Four: Recommendations

In this theme the participants have provided suggestions on how to address the problems in the education sector. All participants emphasized that working conditions push them to leave the

profession. Demir highlighted the need for a change in the behavior and perspective of private school owners, stating:

I believe that private school owners in Türkiye should take steps to truly appreciate and value teachers. When you look at private schools, especially the larger chains, you can find some that employ teachers at minimum wage and others who offer slightly higher salaries. Now, I think about this: these private school owners are among the wealthiest individuals in Türkiye. When they provide teachers with an opportunity to be happy, to make a living, to educate their children, this country will flourish... It will continue to provide high-quality education, continue with happiness, and teachers won't want to quit. They won't think, *"I'm forced to do this job"*. They won't worry about what would happen if they leave and can't find another job. It's not about entering a job with a lower salary; it's about being able to say, *"Look, I am receiving the salary I deserve, everything is fine"* and doing their job comfortably without worrying about it. That would make everyone happy.

Esma, on the other hand, drew attention to the responsibility of the government, stating:

The government cannot intervene too much, but for instance, granting permission to open schools should not be given to everyone. There is a flaw there, in analyzing the financial background. Permission to open schools should not be granted to individuals; it should be given to foundations. These are all contributing factors.

Cangül expressed the following: *"I believe that if private schools do not turn into purely commercial entities, education can reach better places"*. Cemre similarly stated, *"Personally, if things were not like this, if teachers were able to work at a level where they received the salaries they deserved, I personally wouldn't quit my profession. I would say, "How wonderful, I have vacation time, oh, I come home at five, I have no weekends, and I am teaching the children with fun"*.

Selin added:

I think every profession should have a minimum salary, and private school teachers should also have a minimum salary. They should be able to receive a salary at least equal to that of a government teacher and enough to make a living. However, all schools determine salaries by looking at each other. One school offers this, another offers that.

To summarize, the recommendations include the government's need to regulate and supervise private schools, establish a minimum salary for teachers, and private school owners improving teachers' salaries.

The reasons for teachers leaving the profession can be summarized as low salaries, heavy workload, diminishing value placed on teachers, issues with parents and administrators, and the availability of opportunities in other professions.

3. CONCLUSION

In this study, which examines the phenomenon of teachers leaving the profession in private educational institutions, we have reached four themes: *profession-specific experiences, experiences in private educational institutions, opportunities, and recommendations*.

Under the theme of profession-specific experiences, it has been revealed that the participants' initial ideas about their teacher identity changed over time after starting their profession. While there is a sense of satisfaction that comes from working with children and teaching them, there

is also a growing sense of worthlessness. Participants used expressions such as 'falling down', 'cashier', 'babysitter', 'cleaning staff' to describe the transformation of the teaching profession. These analogies are made to emphasize the trivialization of the teaching profession. The transformation of the teacher identity in Türkiye is the result of the implementation of neoliberal policies. Yıldız (2013) states that neoliberalism does not want teachers who have the power and vision to transform society, and therefore the teacher identity has gradually been devalued and transformed into a kind of technician role. As a result of the neoliberal orientation that started in the 1980s in Türkiye, significant changes were made in the teacher training system under the World Bank project in 1997, and the transformation of the teacher identity accelerated. The transformation in the teacher identity has run parallel to the transformation in the functioning of schools (Ünal, 2005). In order to transform teachers into technicians with specific expertise, the school also needs to detach itself from its public nature. Ünal (2005) emphasizes that the "school development model" practices implemented at that time aimed at privatizing education. As a result of the erosion of the public nature of education, the process of transforming teachers from actors capable of transforming society into technicians has led to a transformation from technicians to babysitters or cashiers, as private schools now account for about 20% of the education system. The definition of technician generally describes experts who are responsible for preparing students for competitive, individualistic, and exam-focused education systems. Babysitting, cashiering, or cleaning staff roles, on the other hand, emphasize unskilled jobs. In this case, it is inevitable for teachers to feel undervalued, question their identities, evaluate alternative career options outside of teaching, and leave the profession at the first opportunity.

Under the theme of experiences in private schools, *the sector's situation, relationships, workload, being pushed into non-teaching practices, and salary* categories have been identified. Participants describe the private education sector as more of a commercial establishment than an educational institution. Schools have become businesses that aim for customer satisfaction rather than providing quality education, and this places the responsibility on teachers to ensure that satisfaction. Due to this responsibility, teachers sometimes have to tell parents what they want to hear instead of the truth. While teachers try to fulfill the requirements of their expertise, their actions may not always please the parents, leading to problems between parents and teachers. Participants mentioned that administrators always side with the parents in such problematic situations. This situation also leads to teachers becoming disillusioned with their profession.

Another category in this theme is workload. Teachers in private educational institutions have a heavy workload. Planning tutorials and other activities, meeting with parents, and even working on weekends take up a lot of time beyond the teaching hours. In most cases, no extra payment is provided for these tasks. Since teaching is not just about delivering lessons, it may not be possible to establish a concept of working hours like in other professions. However, the lives of teachers in private schools eventually revolve around constant work and struggling to make a decent income, or even trying to survive on minimum wage. This unsustainable situation leads to leaving the profession at the first opportunity. In fact, teachers may leave the profession even without having another opportunity. Some participants resigned without finding a new job. Dinc (2021) revealed in their research that the perceived workload of private school teachers has a positive effect on work-family conflict. The inability to find time for other social needs beyond family time brings teachers to a point of leaving the profession.

Another category that emerged under the theme of experiences in private educational institutions is being forced into non-teaching practices. Examples such as a music teacher being asked to sing in an event or an English teacher being required to prepare choreography are imposed on teachers against their preferences. Participants mentioned that such tasks not only increase their workload significantly but also make them uncomfortable. Moreover, it is not clearly stated which activities are expected from them when they start the job. The job description of teachers working in private schools is not clear. The functioning of private educational institutions is regulated by the Law on Private Educational Institutions No. 5580. Although education in Türkiye is centrally managed and education policies are determined by the Ministry, there is no standard for teachers' working conditions. Teachers working in private educational institutions are subject to the Labor Law No. 4857 as they are considered employees. The fact that teachers have to comply with one law while practicing their profession and another law regarding issues such as salary and benefits makes it difficult to solve their problems (Çiçek, 2009; Alan, 2020). According to the state, teachers working in private schools are no different from employees working in any other workplace. Since the rights and responsibilities of teachers are not clearly regulated at the legal level, there is no obstacle to demands such as wearing a costume or singing.

Similarly, the government has no influence or control over teachers' salaries in private educational institutions. All participants mentioned that salaries in private schools are very low. It is also observed on social media that teachers occasionally share their pay slips to express their dissatisfaction. As the number of private schools has increased, teachers' salaries have decreased. The amendment made in 2014 to the Law on Private Educational Institutions, numbered 5580, can be considered a turning point in this regard. The removal of the provision stating, "*No less than the monthly salary paid in public schools and the additional payment within the scope of social assistance shall be given to those performing managerial and educational services in schools, based on their seniority (excluding retirees)*" paved the way for teachers' salaries in private schools to be lower than those of teachers working in public schools. Currently, many teachers work for minimum wage. This situation is one of the major factors leading to teachers leaving the profession.

The third theme that emerged in the study is the theme of *opportunities*. The analysis revealed that teachers leave the profession or have the intention to leave as soon as they find opportunities where they can utilize their expertise, their responsibilities are clearly defined, and they can earn higher incomes.

In the *recommendations* theme, participants emphasized that private school owners should provide teachers with deserved working conditions and satisfactory salaries. They also recommend the government should regulate and oversee private schools. Although basic matters such as opening, operating, and closing schools are defined by laws, it is difficult to claim that sufficient oversight is being conducted. Occasionally, news about schools closing abruptly before the end of the academic year is reflected in the media (Cumhuriyet, 2022). In such cases, both students and teachers are affected. The policies implemented under the assumption that privatization would improve the quality of education have resulted in a situation where the state has almost no influence in a rapidly growing segment of the education system. In this segment, parents are happy because they have a say in their children's education, and private school owners are happy because they make profits. The only group that is not satisfied in this picture is the teachers whose demands are not met.

The private school sector in Turkey has grown rapidly over the last decade, and this growth has been unregulated. It cannot be said that this lack of regulation is unique to the private school sector or is an exception compared to other sectors, as it is in line with the nature of capitalist enterprises. In the early days, families' increasing interest in educational options, along with state incentives that accelerated from 2010 onwards and reduced costs, led to a rapid increase in profit margins, particularly after the obligation for teacher salaries to be at least at the level of state schools was lifted in 2014, which also alleviated personnel costs (İş Bankası, 2018). Companies with investments in other sectors were drawn to the private school sector due to attractive profits. For instance, one of the largest construction companies purchased the country's biggest private school chain (Euronews, 2017). Sectors with high-profit margins appeared attractive to investors, leading to a rapid increase in the number of private schools. As the number of schools grew, competition naturally intensified, prompting attempts to improve educational quality while also reducing costs to survive. With the addition of economic crises, instances of cutting teacher salaries and social rights, as well as not paying salaries for months, became common in the sector. Many unlicensed schools and courses emerged to minimize costs and be free from legal obligations (MoNE, 2024). This unregulated competition has made working conditions for teachers more difficult, leading some to leave the profession.

In Human Resources Management literature, a certain level of employee turnover is considered positive because it can provide high performance among employees and add dynamism to the organization. Similarly, there are views on the positive aspects of teacher turnover. According to this perspective, a teacher who works in the same school for a very long time may be at risk of being resistant to change (Ushurova, Tösten & Kayra, 2023). Of course, in light of the changes in the education system today and technological advancements, teachers need to be open to continuous change and learning. However, teachers working in private schools are inevitably more open to innovations compared to their counterparts in state schools. Additionally, a school has the right to terminate a teacher whose performance declines by not renewing their contract. Therefore, the necessary circulation of teachers can be achieved naturally. However, more discussion is needed on the phenomenon of teachers leaving the profession, which is the focus of our study. As it is a relatively new situation, there is currently insufficient research in this area. Moreover, there are no adequate and in-depth reports or statistics providing sufficient data. This has been the greatest limitation of this research. Based on news reflected in social media and the press, this study raises questions about an emerging phenomenon and is primarily based on teachers' narratives. Furthermore, there is a lack of theoretical studies adapted to the context of education and teachers related to employee turnover, which is largely informed by Human Resources Management literature. We hope that this research and future studies will lead to more comprehensive and in-depth knowledge on the subject.

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations can be made. Policymakers should take into account the working conditions of teachers in private schools and establish legal regulations and necessary oversight to improve these conditions, including issues such as salaries.

The departure of teachers is seen as a negative situation due to the disruption of the relationship established with students and parents and the time wasted in getting accustomed to new teachers. However, the significant number of resigning teachers indicates that private schools are not eager to retain their teachers. We recommend researchers to find out why schools risk teachers' turnover instead of paying more, and what mechanisms are working at this point. We

also recommend more research on how universities, school administrators, unions, and other organizations can contribute to improving teachers' working conditions and retaining them in the profession.

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