

# Navigating Success: The Impact of YKS on High-Achieving Students in Türkiye

## Başarının Peşinde: YKS'nin Türkiye'deki Yüksek Başarılı Öğrenciler Üzerindeki Etkisi

Rumeysanur Erikli Doğan<sup>1\*</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Marmara Üniversitesi Dijital Beşerî Bilimler Uygulama ve Araştırma Merkezi Misafir Araştırmacı, İstanbul, Türkiye

**Abstract:** This study examines the impact of a high-stake exam, namely Higher Education Institutions Examination (YKS), on high-achieving students' educational experiences in Türkiye. A qualitative approach was employed through semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected sample of first-year medical students who ranked among the top 10,000 candidates (top 0.5%) in the 2023 YKS and enrolled in top public medical schools in Istanbul and Ankara. Content analysis and coding of 23 student and 10 family interviews reveal that these high-achieving students are characterized by (i) academic seriousness and dedication and (ii) predominantly excessive, though sometimes balanced, time allocation for YKS preparation. Beyond these academic distinctions, these high-achieving students also bear the burden of (iii) emotional distress during YKS preparation and (iv) persistent ambition. Class and gender analysis reveals distinct patterns: students from different class backgrounds defined free time activities differently, and while female students from all classes shared the emotional burden of YKS preparation, only working-class male students explicitly narrated their stress. Given the persistent emphasis on high-stakes exam rankings in Türkiye and the absence of research on the impact of the exam on students' study practices, this study offers critical insights into the specific form of studenthood such success demands by focusing on those who reached the top tier of academic performance in YKS.

**Keywords:** high-achieving students, high-stakes exam, university entrance exam, Higher Education Institutions Examination

**Özet:** Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de yüksek başarılı öğrencilerin eğitim hayatları üzerinde yüksek riskli bir sınav olan Yükseköğretim Kurumları Sınavı'nın (YKS) etkisini incelemektedir. 2023 YKS'de ilk 10.000 aday arasına giren (ilk %0,5) ve İstanbul ile Ankara'daki önde gelen devlet tıp fakültelerine kayıt yaptıran birinci sınıf tıp öğrencilerinden amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle seçilen katılımcılarla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler aracılığıyla nitel bir yaklaşım benimsenmiştir. 23 öğrenci ve 10 aile görüşmesinin içerik analizi ve kodlaması, bu yüksek başarılı öğrencilerin şu özelliklerle karakterize ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır: (i) eğitim hayatları boyunca akademik ciddiyet ve bağlılık; (ii) YKS hazırlığına ağırlıklı olarak çok fazla ancak bazen dengeli zaman ayırma. Bu akademik ayrımların ötesinde, bu yüksek başarılı öğrenciler ayrıca (iii) YKS hazırlığı sırasında duygusal sıkıntı ve (iv) kalıcı hırs yükünü de taşımaktadırlar. Sınıf ve toplumsal cinsiyet analizi farklı örüntüler ortaya koymaktadır: farklı sınıf geçmişlerinden gelen öğrenciler boş zaman aktivitelerini farklı şekilde tanımlamış ve tüm sınıflardan kadın öğrenciler YKS hazırlığının duygusal yükünü belirtirken, yalnızca işçi sınıfından erkek öğrenciler duygusal çöküşlerini açıkça anlatmıştır. Türkiye'de yüksek riskli sınav sıralamalarına verilen kalıcı önem ve sınavın öğrencilerin psikolojik iyi oluşu ve çalışma pratikleri üzerindeki etkisine ilişkin araştırmaların sınırlılığı göz önüne alındığında, bu çalışma YKS'de en üst akademik performans seviyesine ulaşanlara odaklanarak bu tür bir üst başarının gerektirdiği öğrencilik biçimine dair kritik içgörüler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** derece öğrencileri, yüksek riskli sınav, üniversite giriş sınavı, YKS

## 1. Introduction

High-stakes exams are defined as assessments with significant consequences for students' academic achievement, such as promotion to the next educational level or graduation, as well as for teachers' performance evalua-

tions, and schools' funding (Johnson et al., 2008, as cited in Polesel et al., 2012). While certain elements of this definition vary across countries due to differing policies, the common feature among many Asian and European nations is the substantial impact these exams exert on students' educational trajectories. In Türkiye, although

\* İletişim Yazarı / Corresponding author.  
✉ sultanrumi38@gmail.com

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grade point averages, degrees in science olympiads, and class rankings influence both YKS scores and university placement, the primary determinant remains the score obtained from the two-stage examination, Basic and Field Proficiency Tests, (TYT and AYT), administered on consecutive days, and the resulting ranking.

The efficiency of high-stakes exams has been questioned across multiple dimensions, including test reliability, adverse effects on learning habits, and parent-child relationships (Polesel et al., 2012). Additionally, the impact of high-stakes exams on student well-being, the focus of this article, began to be scrutinized following Perrone's (1991) study demonstrating that such examinations diminish students' self-confidence. To contextualize the impact of YKS on high-achieving students' well-being and study practices, I review both international and Turkish literature on high-stakes examinations.

The educational and youth studies literature on the impact of high-stakes examinations, predominantly published within the last five years and addressing university entrance, high school transition, and secondary school assessments, demonstrates how these exams are detrimental to student well-being, largely through the study routines they necessitate. The sole qualitative study on this topic examines how Hong Kong's secondary school entrance exam diminished overall happiness and learning capacity among fifth- and sixth-grade primary students (Cho & Chan, 2020). Students had no leisure time: school recess, typically spent socializing with peers, was curtailed by teachers requiring supplementary test preparation, while after-school hours were consumed by homework routines devolved into rote drilling, repetitive practice without comprehension, and sleep decreased to five or six hours nightly for these 10- or 11-year-old children (Cho & Chan, 2020, pp. 6-7). Consequently, students reported emotional distress illustrating how high-stakes exams undermined both their happiness and health.

Quantitative studies and analytical reviews in the educational, youth and child studies literature from various countries similarly demonstrate that high-stakes exams negatively impact student well-being and reduce studying to repetitive, unconscious practice. A theoretical literature review of China's university entrance examination, the Gaokao, reveals that studies published over the past decade characterize the exam as a "rite of passage" that imposes a substantial emotional burden on students, with failure perceived as damaging to family honor (Fu, 2024, p. 24). Beyond parental expectations, the intense competition inherent in such examinations amplifies anxiety and stress, potentially leading to in-

somnia and depression rooted in fear of failure (Beck et al., 2023; Fu, 2024; Högberg & Horn, 2022; Pienyu et al., 2024). The emotional toll manifests through students' sense of losing control over their lives, diminished self-esteem, and reduced motivation to study (Beck et al., 2023; French et al., 2024; Polesel et al., 2012). In addition to sleep disturbances, emotional distress produces physiological effects, including elevated cortisol levels that impair attention during examinations (Högberg & Horn, 2022) as well as vomiting and fear-induced freezing (Polesel et al., 2012).

In Türkiye, the long-standing implementation of high-stakes exams for educational transitions to high school and university provides substantial empirical opportunities to examine their impact on students. In the educational literature, phenomenological studies have explored this impact by examining students' meaning-making around these exams, revealing significant emotional toll through qualitative analysis of student narratives regarding the nature of the exams and their underlying significance (Baş & Kıvılcım, 2019; Dinç et al., 2014; Ulusoy, 2020; Yavrutürk, 2024; Yüksel et al., 2023). The emotional burden of high-stakes exams, LGS for high school admission and YKS for university entrance, manifests through metaphors of death, including references to "Azrael" (the angel of death) and nightmares representing threats to survival (Ulusoy, 2020; Yüksel et al., 2023, pp. 45-46). Science high school students characterized YKS as "Chinese torture," signifying prolonged, relentless suffering leading to psychological trauma and exhaustion (Yavrutürk, 2024, p. 161). The quantitative studies also support that the high-stakes exam in Türkiye, LGS and YKS, increase students' anxiety and diminish their times for sleep, entertainment and recreational activities (Dandan & Coşkuntuncel, 2026; Kaya & Yiğit 2025; Kumandaş & Kutlu 2014). These studies, mostly from education, youth and child studies literature, are significant for understanding the negative metaphors students construct around high-stakes exams, particularly YKS, which indirectly reveal the examinations' emotional toll.

Nevertheless, the educational sociology perspective of reproduction theory, as developed by Bourdieu, and the studies influenced by his work enable us to understand how the school, including high-stakes examinations, functions as an instrument for the reproduction of dominant class positions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). The educational system implicitly rewards the inherited economic, social, and cultural capital possessed by students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. While middle-class families mobilize these resources to support their children's academic success through pri-

vate schooling, tutoring, and informed parental guidance (Kleanthous, 2013; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2005; Sianou-Kyrgiou & Tsiplakides, 2009; Vryonides, 2009; Yoon, 2020), working-class students lack these advantages. Consequently, they encounter various forms of constraint throughout their educational trajectories, which negatively affect their participation and performance in high-stakes examinations (Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1998, 2017).

In Türkiye, studies on the social origins of high school students and academic success demonstrate that social hierarchy is both transferred and reinforced at the high school level, given that the parents of students in science high schools predominantly come from higher-grade service employee backgrounds, while those of students in religious and vocational high schools come from manual laboring backgrounds (Aksu, 1990; Akşit et al., 2000; Önur, 2013). Furthermore, the prestige derived from the high school attended is subsequently reinforced by university enrollment, producing a spillover effect (Koytak, 2025; Yazgan & Suğur, 2018).

Addressing a critical gap in the literature, this study examines the educational trajectories of high-ranking students from diverse class backgrounds, categorized according to Goldthorpe's (1987) class scheme, higher-grade and lower-grade service employees, small business owners, the self-employed, and the working class.

## 2. Method

This study forms part of my Ph.D. thesis examining how high-achieving students enrolled in top public medical schools, primarily in Istanbul and Ankara, mobilized their economic, social and cultural capital to achieve high rankings and select their major, with particular attention to class dynamics underlying medical career choice.<sup>1</sup> This article presents findings on how YKS, as a high-stakes examination, impacts educational experiences of these students.

I employed a qualitative approach with a purposeful sampling of the medical students in their freshmen or English preparatory classes who ranked among the top 10,000 candidates (top 0.5%) in the 2023 YKS and enrolled in top public medical schools in İstanbul or Ankara, and their family members whenever I was able to conduct interviews with them. I employed semi-structured interviews, refined through three pilot sessions and advisor feedback, to allow for flexible inquiry into participants' distinctive experiences. To recruit participants, I utilized snowball and opportunity sampling

techniques by attending lectures in Marmara and İstanbul Medeniyet medical schools, reaching student clubs in my visits to Cerrahpaşa, Çapa and Marmara medical schools and the events of a medical foundation providing scholarships to medical students. Thus, I conducted interviews with 23 first-year medical students mostly on university campuses and also on Zoom. These interviews were complemented by interviews with the families of 10 participants on Zoom or Whatsapp since almost all of them live outside of İstanbul.

Adopting an interpretivist epistemology, I focused on participants' subjective narratives rather than verifying factual consistency between parent and student accounts. (Creswell, Poth 2018; Seidman 2019, p. 14). While analyzing my interviews, I employed a content analysis, to identify patterns and codes, in student and family interviews (Patton 2015: 790), and I utilized an analytical inductive approach with multiple coding cycles in analyzing the impact of the high-stake exam and pursuit of high ranking on these medical students from the patterns in the students' and their families' account to build analytically promising codes and if possible subcodes. (Saldaña 2016; Saunders et al. 2018: 1896). Student responses to interview questions such as "Tell me about yourself in the context of your education" and "Can you describe a typical day during your final year of high school?", along with follow-up questions regarding how they spent or used to spend their free time in high school, provided the primary data. These were complemented by family members' accounts of their children's studenthood and YKS preparation process.

Of the 23 participants, 12 are female and 11 are male (►Table 1). Class positions are classified according to Goldthorpe's class scheme (1987), which categorizes households by employment relations, capturing the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of class. Participants represent diverse class backgrounds, determined by the occupation of the highest-positioned parent, predominantly fathers (►Table 2). The average number of participants per class position is 6; however, those from higher-grade service employee backgrounds are under-represented at 3, as accessing individuals from higher class positions proved more difficult. Given that the study already targets a distinctive set of students who achieved high rankings in the 2023 YKS and enrolled in public medical schools, incorporating an elite class dimension made it considerably more difficult to reach these participants. Access to lower class participants was facilitated through a scholarship endowment for medical students, while visits to medical faculties and

<sup>1</sup> The title of my thesis is "Unequal Paths to Medicine: Class Inequalities Among YKS High-achieving students", accessible on YÖK Tez.

**Table 1. Features of the participant students**

Stu- dent	Gender	Father's last school	Father's occupation	Mother's last school	Mother's occupation	Interval_Per- centage Share of High School	High School	Ranking Interval at YKS	Medical School	Family Inter- view	Parental Residence	Assigned Class (Goldthorpe)
ID5	Female	Management Major	Tradesman	Law School	Lawyer	<1	Science	0-2000	Cerrahpaşa	Mother	Istanbul	Employee service higher grade
ID6	Female	Medical School	Assoc. Medical Doctor	Major in Astronomy and space sciences	Housewife		Private	6001-8000	SBÜ Hami- diye	Parents	Diyarbakır	Employee service higher grade
ID22	Male	Master's degree	Medical Doctor	Medical school	Doctor	<4	Science	2001-4000	Istanbul Çapa		Konya	Employee service higher grade
ID1	Male	High School	University Security Personnel	High School	Housewife	<1	Science	2001-4000	Istanbul Çapa		Bursa	Employee service lower grade
ID4	Female	History Major	History teacher in high school	Major in math teacher education	Secondary School Math Teacher	<10	Religious	6001-8000	SBÜ Hami- diye	Parents	Kocaeli	Employee service lower grade
ID10	Female	VET school	Retired police officer	Primary school	Needle	<1	Religious Project	2001-4000	Cerrahpaşa	Mother	Istanbul	Employee service lower grade
ID11	Female	Theology at VET school	Muezzin	Primary school	Retired tailor	<1	Religious Project	0-2000	Cerrahpaşa		Adana	Employee service lower grade
ID8	Female	Secondary school	Social service officer	Primary school	Housewife	<3	Science	2001-4000	Cerrahpaşa		Diyarbakır	Employee service lower grade
ID16	Female	VET school	Manager in the family court registry	Open school manage- ment major	Retired head of editorial office in the courthouse		Private	4001-6000	Marmara		Ordu	Employee service lower grade
ID 17	Male	VET school	Retired ensign	Open school	Nurse		Private	4001-6000	Marmara		Çanakkale	Employee service lower grade
ID9	Female	Theology Major	High school assistant director	High School	Housewife	<1	Religious Project	0-2000	Cerrahpaşa		Ordu	Employee service lower grade
ID18	Male	Secondary school	Tradesman	Secondary school	Housewife	<10	Science	4001-6000	Istanbul Çapa		Bitlis	Self-Employed Industrial
ID19	Male	Primary school	Retired tradesman	High School	Housewife	<2	Anatolian	4001-6000	Istanbul Çapa		Eskişehir	Self-Employed Industrial
ID23	Male	Secondary school	Retired tradesman	Theology at VET school	Housewife	>10	Religious	2001-4000	Istanbul Çapa	Mother	Kayseri	Self-Employed Industrial
ID15	Male	Planning Enginee- ring Major	Running a planning office	M.A. in Environmental Engineering	Housewife		Private	4001-6000	Marmara	Mother	Kayseri	Small Business Owner
ID3	Female	Finance Major	Tradesman	High school	Housewife	<2	Religious	8001-10000	Ankara SBÜ		Sakarya	Small Business Owner
ID7	Female	Open high school	Shopkeeper, owns printing house	Open high school	Housewife	<2	Science	6001-8000	SBÜ Hami- diye	Parents	Van	Small Business Owner
ID12	Male	High school	Worker in a factory	Primary school	Housewife	<2	Anatolian	4001-6000	Marmara		Istanbul	Working Class
ID13	Male	High school	Customer service representative	High School	Housewife	<3	Science	4001-6000	Marmara	Parents	Van	Working Class
ID14	Male	Primary school	Truck driver	No school	Housewife	>10	Religious Project	4001-6000	Marmara		Hatay	Working Class
ID2	Female	High School	Furniture painter	High School	Housewife	<3	Anatolian	0-2000	Istanbul Çapa	Elder Sister	Istanbul	Working Class
ID20	Male	Secondary school	Construction worker	Primary school	Housewife	<1	Anatolian	4001-6000	Istanbul Çapa		Şanlıurfa	Working Class
ID21	Female	Left primary school	Waste picker	Primary school	Housewife	<4	Anatolian	8001-10000	Istanbul Çapa	Mother	Diyarbakır	Working Class

**Table 2.** The Occupations Classified According to Goldthorpe’s Class Scheme

	Higher Grade Service Employees	Lower Grade Service Employees	Small Business Owners (Self-employed business not stated as they rotate between different businesses)	Working Classes
	Lawyer	Officers in public institutions	Planning officer	Supervisor of workers
	Doctor	Muezzin	Printing house owner	Truck driver
		Security Personnel	Businessman on iron and steel	Factory Worker
		Policeman		Construction Worker
		Nurse		Furniture Painter
		Ensign		Junk Dealer
		Teacher		
Number of Students	3	8	6	6
Family interview per student	2	2	3	3

personal networks enabled contact with higher-grade class participants. In addition to class and gender, participants are geographically diverse, though predominantly from Istanbul and southeastern cities. Those from Anatolian cities primarily attended science high schools, while those from Istanbul graduated from either top-tier religious project high schools or top-ranking Anatolian or science high schools. The students were graduated from highly selective high schools, as reflected in the median LGS interval ranking of 2%. The largest group, 7 students, graduated from science high schools, which is unsurprising given that admission to top public medical schools requires high scores in the sciences (►Table 3 and 4). An equal number came from religious high schools (İmam Hatip), of whom 4 attended project religious high schools, which require higher LGS scores than their non-project counterparts. Students from both science and project religious high schools reported benefitting extensively from the institutional support of directors and teachers in their YKS preparation, a point elaborated upon in the findings section. Regarding medical faculty enrollment, one student aside, who is enrolled in Ankara, all others attend faculties in Istanbul, with the largest group of 8 attending Istanbul Medical School (ÇAPA), followed by Marmara, Cerrahpaşa, SBÜ Hamidiye, and Gülhane. A notable researcher bias stemmed from my subject positioning as a former high-achieving student who ranked among the top 500 in the university entrance exam. In initial encounters, I anticipated students would express considerable pride in their rankings; the frequent absence of such pride prompted critical reflection and enabled detection of the theme of sustained ambition, manifested through dissatisfaction with achieved rankings. Regarding technological tools, I used Transcripator for interview transcription and conducted coding and analysis in

MAXQDA 2025. I employed Claude Sonnet 4.5 for text refinement but did not consult AI for idea generation. I assume full responsibility for the article’s content. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Marmara University Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 29, Decision No. 31, May 7, 2025).

### 3. FINDINGS

The analysis of the mostly student and also family interviews reveals the efforts, sacrifices, and challenges associated with being a high-achieving student. These codes provide the analytical framework for the subse-

**Table 3.** Distribution of Students by High School Type

High School	Number of Students
Anatolian	5
Private	4
Religious	3
Religious Project	4
Science	7
Grand Total	23

**Table 4.** Distribution of Students by Faculty

Medical Faculty	Number of Students
Ankara SBÜ	1
Cerrahpaşa	5
İstanbul (Çapa)	8
Marmara	6
SBÜ Hamidiye	3
Grand Total	23

quent sections:

- Academic Seriousness and Dedication: Consistent Success, Self-Discipline, and Sustained Effort Throughout Education.
- Time Allocation for YKS: Excessive vs. Balanced Study.
- Emotional Breakdowns.
- Sustained Ambitions

Each of these codes will be explored sequentially in the following subsections, drawing upon in-depth accounts from both students and their parents.

### 3.1. Academic Seriousness and Dedication: Consistent Success, Self-Discipline, and Studying Hard in Entire Education

Among these high-achieving students, schooling and academic success more broadly were treated like a serious enterprise demanding total, unquestioned commitment. This commitment rests on a triad of sustained achievement across educational stages, diligent hard work, rigorous self-discipline, all of which collectively generated support from both families and educational institutions, thereby enabling students to achieve high rankings in the YKS.

The high-achieving students were successful and top of their classes from the early years of education. The kind of success pattern they had has materialized in the narrative of a female student in her school trajectory as she remarkably stated her ranking in the class in each level of education revealing the sense of race she was involved in:

*“Primary school was very competitive. That’s why I always tried to be the best. Our teacher was also very competitive and pushed us hard, even though we were little kids, she treated us like adults. When I moved on to middle school, that mindset of academic perfectionism stayed with me because of my primary school experience. I worked really hard in middle school too and again became second in my class. But by eighth grade, I was the top student of the term. I took the high school entrance exam very seriously, thinking I needed to get into a top school, like it was something really big.”<sup>2</sup>*

Her account reflected the seriousness with which she approached every level of education, which was initiated

and sustained by her primary school teacher, showing the significance of primary schoolteachers in the foundation of academic success of the students. Her academic discipline coming from the primary school culminated in the LGS, taken at the transition from secondary to high school since she was aware of accessing a top-tier high school was significant for accessing top university and her occupation in the future. By maintaining this consistent trajectory of success, she achieved a high ranking in the LGS as she aimed for and although she could have enrolled in the top science high school in the city, she got a full scholarship from a private high school and enrolled there. Similar to her, nearly all other high-achieving students were “top of their class,” with this pattern often extending back to primary school. Their academic success was further demonstrated by their high performance in the LGS, as the median success percentile of the high schools they attended was around 2%.

One of the reasons cited by both the students and their parents for their consistent academic success is their strong sense of self-discipline. This discipline was evident in behaviors such as studying without needing reminders from parents, being described as easier to manage compared to siblings, and approaching schoolwork with a clear sense of responsibility and planning. A working class father illustrated this disciplined and planned approach to studying with the following account:

*“He studied regularly (my son). You know how some students are. You tell them to study, they do it for 15 minutes, then spend the next three and a half hours just pretending or distracting you. He wasn’t like that. He made himself a study schedule. He followed that schedule and studied regularly. If it was time for a break, he’d take his break, have some tea or something, and then go back to continue studying according to his schedule.”<sup>3</sup>*

Such self-disciplined study habits were also reflected in the fact that these children did not need parental reminders to study which was a point repeatedly mentioned in the interviews: “We (the parents) never told him/her to study. (Ona hiçbir zaman çağış demedik.)”<sup>4</sup>

In line with this disciplined approach to studying, all high-achieving students in my study were hardworking students. This hardworking was also driven by the student’s high aspirations, as illustrated by a mother’s account of her daughter, who aimed to rank among the top

<sup>2</sup> ID 16

<sup>3</sup> The father of ID 13

<sup>4</sup> ID 12, ID 8, ID 5

500 students in the YKS but ultimately fell short:

*“Her grades, her grades, all those notebooks... every day she would draw up plans for herself. She always had a study plan. The whole school was constantly studying. If she got a 99, she'd be upset. That's how hard she worked. She studied all the time.”<sup>5</sup>*

Their hard work also extended to preparation for the YKS, as they began studying for the exam well before the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, most commonly in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, and in some cases as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. A male student stated this like a rule:

*“You know how people say, “Get the 11th-grade part of the university entrance exam (AYT) done in 11th grade.” Yeah, that's exactly what we did.”<sup>6</sup>*

His classmates' confirmation during the interview highlighted that early and systematic AYT preparation has become a norm among high-achieving students beginning preparation in the final year is considered inadequate.

The disciplined and hardworking attitude towards academic success, manifested in high scores at the LGS and YKS, appears to stem from two interrelated sources: educational institutions, primarily their high schools and dershanes, and core and extended family members, both of whom conveyed to students a belief in their capabilities, expressed in interviews through the phrase “O yapar” (He/She can do it). While both sources reinforced students' sense of academic potential, their emphases differed. Families focused primarily on the desired major, which for working-class, self-employed, and lower-grade service employee households was predominantly medicine, whereas small business owner and higher-grade service employee families extended their aspirations to fields such as engineering and pilotage in my study. Educational institutions, by contrast, went beyond encouraging students to aim for medicine; they set remarkably high ranking targets, in some cases as demanding as finishing in the top 500, placing students within the top 0.025% of all YKS candidates.

Families directed students to medical school by framing their past LGS success as proof of innate ability to overcome the hardships of YKS. For instance, a working-class father shared his reasoning: “Son, you're a smart kid. You got into that high school as the top student... Medicine suits you.” This emphasis on innate smartness

obscures the structural necessity for a working-class child to secure an occupation with high economic and symbolic capital for upward mobility. It resonates with Bourdieu's “ideology of talent,” which consecrates exceptional success by veiling the social origins and sustained practices that make it possible (Bourdieu 2022: 32–34; Jourdain & Naulin 2020: 51). Extended family members reinforced this pressure during social gatherings, often explicitly stating their expectations of having “a doctor in the family. As the student recounted:

*“During Eid visits, my relatives already knew I was a successful student. They'd say things like, ‘So, what are you going to achieve?’ and some would immediately start with, ‘Hopefully, we'll have a doctor in the family.’”<sup>7</sup>*

Educational institutions similarly channeled students toward high-ranking majors: science and Anatolian high schools predominantly toward medicine, and religious high schools toward engineering, a field requiring comparably high rankings. Teachers and administrators at both high schools and dershanes reinforced these trajectories by affirming students' capacity for top YKS performance, at times with striking specificity, for instance, telling a student they would “reach the first 5,000 at least.”<sup>8</sup> This institutional pressure was not disinterested: placing students in top rankings and medical school carries significant prestige for schools and dershanes alike. Students' accounts reveal that administrators explicitly framed medicine as a priority, “it is important to say you have high number of graduates in medical school”<sup>9</sup> (tıpçı çıkarmak) and this logic was internalized by students themselves. One participant, for instance, chose between two top Anatolian high schools in Istanbul by comparing the number of graduates each had enrolled in medical school.

### 3.2. Time allocation for YKS: Excessive vs Balanced Study

Most of the high-achieving students, 18 out of 23, studied YKS intensively and a few of them also very much emphasized how their study routines were balanced as usually unexpected from high-achieving students.

When I asked the participants to describe their daily routines during their final year of preparation, they consistently emphasized how their days were consumed by studying. On average, they reported spending around eight hours a day studying, oscillating between school

<sup>5</sup> The mother of ID 10

<sup>6</sup> ID 1

<sup>7</sup> ID 13

<sup>8</sup> ID 18

<sup>9</sup> ID 5

and the library. Some went far beyond this, reaching up to seventeen hours of study per day, leaving time for little else but sleep. To illustrate what such an intense routine entailed in everyday life, a working class male student described his typical day during that year almost hour by hour:

*“I used to be at school by around 7:30 in the morning. I’d solve a practice test before classes started. Then I’d attend the main lessons, especially the important ones like math, physics, chemistry, and biology. For the less important classes, I wouldn’t really pay attention. Instead, we had a study room at school where I’d go to study. After school, I’d head straight to my prep course. Meals and stuff didn’t really matter. We’d have 3 or 4 more lessons, and those would end around 5:30 or 6:00 (p.m.). Then I’d study in the study hall until about 11:00 or 12:00 (p.m.) at night. I’d be home around midnight.”<sup>10</sup>*

He explained this excessive study as if it was very normal. But some other students revealed the burden of this excessive study on them by saying he felt “like a robot”<sup>11</sup>, his “days sucked (with) ridiculous time slots”<sup>12</sup> and “barely saw the family”<sup>13</sup>. A smaller number of students, 5 out of 23, emphasized how their study for YKS was not like studying incessantly but rather either enjoying time with social activities unlike what was expected from a high-achieving student. The types of social activities students engaged in varied according to their class positions. For students from working class and self-employed backgrounds, social activities typically referred to voluntary or intellectual pursuits. In contrast, for students from higher- and lower grade employee families, social activities were more commonly associated with leisure and entertainment.

To exemplify the activities for the public benefit, a male student from the self-employed class described how he balanced his studies with voluntaristic activities as such:

*“I may have gotten up early for travel (for voluntary endowment activities), but I was never the kind of person who woke up at 6*

*a.m. to sit at a desk. I didn’t like breaking up my night’s sleep. I usually went to bed around midnight or 1 a.m. I also didn’t cut myself off from social activities. I kept up with them as much as I could.”<sup>14</sup>*

He distinguished himself from students who focused solely on intense YKS preparation by spending time on voluntary activities instead. In the 11th grade, he also learned Ottoman Turkish and played the ney. Similarly, the working class students who claimed to balance their studies with social activities did so through involvement in philosophy clubs<sup>15</sup>, volunteering at organizations supporting orphans, and participating in composition and poetry competitions.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, students from higher- and lower grade employee families who inherited economic and cultural privileges from their parents and who claimed to balance their studies with social activities were primarily engaged in leisure activities for personal enjoyment rather than for the public good. To illustrate these activities, a female student with the highest level of economic capital among all participants whose father runs an international electronics business and whose mother is a lawyer at a prestigious public finance institution described her balanced study strategy during her gap year as follows:

*“I kept up with my social life just fine. I studied and then went out, or I went out (for shopping or coffeehouses) and then studied. I went on vacation too. The fact that it was a year of major exams didn’t matter to me. If I needed to go on a trip, I went.”<sup>17</sup>*

As someone who occasionally traveled abroad, especially to European cities, she went to Budapest just three months before the YKS, which surprised her friends given her high achievement, ranking around 1,500. Similarly, students from lower grade employee families and small business owner backgrounds balanced their studies with leisure activities such as trying out different restaurants<sup>18</sup> watching talk shows<sup>19</sup>, and playing video games for hours.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, even among students who described their prepara-

<sup>10</sup> ID 20

<sup>11</sup> ID 2

<sup>12</sup> ID 2

<sup>13</sup> ID 13

<sup>14</sup> ID 19

<sup>15</sup> ID 13

<sup>16</sup> ID 14

<sup>17</sup> ID 5

<sup>18</sup> ID 17

<sup>19</sup> ID 17

<sup>20</sup> ID 15

tion for the YKS as a balanced process, combining study with social activities, clear class differences emerged in the types of activities they engaged in. Yet, despite framing their approach as balanced, most also experienced considerable stress and tension during the preparation period, as discussed in the following section.

### 3.3. Emotional Breakdowns

Many high-achieving students experienced considerable emotional strain while striving to attain the scores and the rankings required for admission to top public medical schools. Their ambitions varied, some aimed to rank among the top 5,000, others the top 1,000 or even 500, yet all framed their success in terms of competitive ranking.

The ways in which they made sense of this stress were shaped by both gender and class, influencing how they narrated episodes of emotional breakdown during their intense preparation for the YKS exam. Female students from diverse class backgrounds spoke openly about their stress and breakdowns, whereas male students' accounts were more implicit and, notably, only working class males disclosed such emotional distress. The reason behind this intersection of class and gender might originate from the level of pressure they felt on their shoulders to be successful in the exam and reach a high class occupation, the necessity of achieving upward mobility, and this pressure creates a must to develop an autoanalysis (Bourdieu, 2015, p. 817). Firstly, female students from a range of class backgrounds articulated the emotional toll of striving for high achievement in various ways. Long-term effort was compounded by parental expectations for a high rank. One female student from a higher grade service employee class recalled, "Even in the first year, I was super stressed. I was seriously losing my mind from the pressure."<sup>21</sup> Another female student from the lower grade employee class cried to her father every day, terrified she would fall short of a top rank.<sup>22</sup> The pressure came from several directions. Both of her parents are teachers, and her mother, a secondary-school mathematics instructor, explained that the girl had internalized perfectionist standards early on, routinely scoring 100 under her mother's close supervision and becoming distressed when she received "only" 99. In moments of panic, the mother would try to reassure her by saying, "You will still be our daughter even if you score 95,"<sup>23</sup> which unintentionally revealed that anything below 100 was seen as a low score in the

family's eyes.

The father, meanwhile, seemed genuinely surprised by the emotional toll these standards imposed. In our interview he recalled that his daughter was "very emotional, unbelievably emotional, during exam preparation. Although she was disciplined and hard-working, she went through constant ups and downs, always asking, 'Can I do it? Am I capable?'"<sup>24</sup> His remarks showed that he had not fully appreciated how exhausting it was for her to maintain top-level performance throughout her schooling. He also underestimated the broader weight of expectations from parents, teachers, and school administrators who all supported her desire to rank among the top 500 students in YKS.

These emotional tolls persisted even after the exam, particularly when students performed below their expectations, often due to only a few mistakes. One female student believed that two errors on the TYT, the basic proficiency exam administered the day before the subject-specific AYT, cost her the opportunity to secure a full scholarship at Koç University, a private foundation university in Istanbul that offers full scholarships to medical students only within the top 100 national rankings. According to her mother, she cried so intensely after the TYT that she lost her motivation to prepare for the AYT.<sup>25</sup> This case illustrates how narrowly students measured success and how a perceived failure, no matter how minor, could undermine months, even years, of preparation. The pressure to achieve near perfection not only affected their performance but also shaped their emotional resilience in the face of setbacks.

While female students from diverse class backgrounds openly expressed the emotional toll of exam preparation and the pressure to achieve high success, only working class male students disclosed similar experiences, and primarily did so indirectly, by describing how they managed or coped with stress. One of these working class male students spoke explicitly about experiencing emotional breakdowns. Three months before the YKS, for example, he began to question the disciplined effort he had sustained for years.

*"I was burned out and said to my family, 'I've been studying for 12 years. I'm done; I won't study anymore.' I just gave up. My parents had so much faith in me. My father and mother even told me to stop studying. I cried, seriously cried, for two or three hours*

<sup>21</sup> ID 5

<sup>22</sup> ID 4

<sup>23</sup> The mother of ID 4

<sup>24</sup> The father of ID 4

<sup>25</sup> The mother of ID 10

*about a month before the exam.*<sup>26</sup>

He added that these emotional setbacks left him unable to study during the final months. On the other hand, other working class male students mentioned how they managed these stressful times. For instance, one of them, who studied at home from morning to night, visited friends at the dersane “so I wouldn’t lose my mind,”<sup>27</sup> revealing how burdensome constant study had become. Another attributed his eventual success to “managing my psychology” and suppressing despair after slipping below the top 5,000<sup>28</sup>. Another working class male fainted upon learning he had missed the top 1,000 and a full scholarship at a leading foundation medical school; devastated, he withdrew to his village and avoided his immediate family, feeling that he had failed to fulfill his ranking goal.<sup>29</sup>

Although being a high-achieving student brought praise and recognition from both core and extended family members, it also came at the cost of deep exhaustion and emotional breakdowns regardless of whether the student maintained a strictly academic routine or tried to balance their studies with social activities. Together, these narratives underscore that disciplined, high-stakes preparation for the YKS often exacts a heavy emotional toll, one mediated by both gender and socioeconomic position.

### 3.4. Sustained Ambitions: Unsatisfied with Achieved Ranking and Ambition of Being the Best Continues after YKS

Beyond the immediate emotional toll of YKS preparation, many students carried their ambitions and their disappointments well into the post-exam period. Although every participant placed within the top 0.5 percent of science track in the 2023 YKS, several still viewed their achievement as insufficient. Their benchmark for success was not merely entering medical school but ranking within the top 500 and securing a full-scholarship place at Koç, Acıbadem, or Medipol or, alternatively, studying molecular biology at Koç University.

For one working class male student, falling short of this threshold rendered his strong national ranking meaningless: “If I had achieved the first 500, I would have been a successful student.”<sup>30</sup> He was aware that even such a ranking might not be sufficient for admission to full-scholarship programs at the top foundation univer-

sities, as recent years had seen students needing to rank within the top 200 to gain entry. Yet the idea of being in the top 500 held powerful symbolic weight. Having missed it, he redirected his unmet ambition toward future milestones in his academic career:

*“Maybe this will always be my study pace...I really slacked off this year. I could’ve slacked even more. But you never know, maybe it was meant to be this way, that I should keep working hard all my life, always striving for something better. If I had reached the highest level, I’m capable of, I could say I gave it my all. But I haven’t reached that yet. I know I can do much better. So, I’ll keep working hard for the rest of my life. I couldn’t do it in YKS, so I’ll do it in TUS. I want to pass the people who passed me in YKS. That’s my goal, God willing.”<sup>31</sup>*

As the son of a father who had worked in construction since the age of fifteen, he aspired to “break the cycle” of his father’s physically demanding labor, reflecting a symbolic “murdering of the father,” (Bourdieu et. al., 1999, p. 510) whereby the father’s current class is denied and surpassed through the child’s educational and professional achievements. Yet, as his account reveals, he found himself caught in another ceaseless cycle of work, not of manual exertion, but of relentless self-discipline and academic striving. His words suggest an internalized form of symbolic punishment for not ranking among the top 500 students in the YKS. Despite knowing that admission to elite foundation medical schools such as Koç, Acıbadem, or Medipol, where generous scholarships are awarded, requires being within the top 200, he continued to carry the burden of what he perceived as failure. By setting new milestones, such as graduation or the TUS exam, he constructed a series of future “redemption points” through which he aimed to surpass those who once outperformed him. This narrative illustrates how classed aspirations were converted into a lifelong drive for achievement.

Another student, who ranked approximately 5,000th, fell short of the threshold for a full scholarship in molecular biology at Koç University. The result was deeply disappointing: she viewed Koç as her only realistic pathway to pursue her interests in the field and eventually continue her studies in the United States, while

<sup>26</sup> ID 1

<sup>27</sup> ID 18

<sup>28</sup> ID 13

<sup>29</sup> ID 20

<sup>30</sup> ID 20

<sup>31</sup> ID 20

the alternative, that was molecular biology at Boğaziçi University, seemed inadequate because of limited laboratory resources and exchange opportunities. As she recalled:

*“I looked at my score and was still trying to process it. ‘How am I ranked 5,000th? What do you mean? Does this mean I can’t even go to Koç University?’”<sup>32</sup>*

Although she ultimately enrolled in a highly selective public medical school, placing in the top 0.2 % nationwide, she continued to feel disappointed and sought to carry her ambition into medical school:

*“Since first grade, I’ve always tried to be the best... There’s disappointment: what if I can’t be the best again? I know I won’t be, because in medical school being the best isn’t just about working hard.”<sup>33</sup>*

This account reflects that the same competitive drive created around the YKS was transported into medical school itself. Their ambitions now centered on out-performing classmates and mapping a tightly scripted postgraduate trajectory, thereby extending the cycle of relentless study and high-stakes striving beyond the entrance-exam stage.

## 4. Discussion

The high-achieving students in this study share characteristics with their counterparts in other high-stakes examination contexts, particularly regarding study routines and physical, emotional, and temporal sacrifices. These students took pride in sustained academic excellence, with some tracing their “top of the class” status to primary school, while both students and parents cited disciplined study habits as evidence of merit. However, years of intensive effort, intensifying during 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade YKS preparation, produced acute stress and, for many, episodes of emotional breakdown mirroring patterns documented elsewhere (Cho & Chan, 2020). Daily study hours averaged around 8 but reached 17 for some students, severely restricting sleep, a deprivation consistent with high-stakes exam contexts globally (Cho & Chan, 2020; Pienyu et al., 2024). Moreover, like Indian students, Turkish high-achieving students began exam-oriented preparation in 11<sup>th</sup> grade (Pienyu et al., 2024).

For students from lower-grade service and working-class backgrounds,<sup>34</sup> aspirations extended further: ranking within the top 500 to secure fully funded placements at

elite foundation universities (Koç, Acıbadem, Medipol) or pursue basic sciences at Koç. Foundation universities were attractive for two reasons. First, high scholarships would provide early economic means, significant given their families’ limited resources. Second, such institutions carry substantial symbolic rewards; Koç University was the most aspired to despite offering comparatively less scholarship than some other foundation medical schools. Falling short of these elevated aspirations, even rankings within the top 0.5% and admission to leading public medical faculties were perceived as inadequate. This phenomenon transcends Fu’s (2024) observation that success becomes defined solely by examination performance; here, success itself becomes an unattainable and endless pursuit.

Nevertheless, Turkish high-achieving students exhibited distinctive features regarding leisure time and gendered expressions of emotional distress. Unlike Hong Kong students whose parents heavily structured leisure through extensive private tutoring for secondary school applications (Cho & Chan, 2020), Turkish high-achieving students experienced less parental control over non-academic time. Regarding gender differences, while existing research suggests female students are more susceptible to examination stress (Högberg & Horn, 2022), my findings reveal a more nuanced pattern: female students across all class backgrounds articulated their anxiety and stress in detail, whereas among male students, only those from working class backgrounds either shared emotional struggles similarly to female students or described coping strategies they developed suggesting class mediates gendered patterns of emotional disclosure.

## 5. Conclusion

High-achieving students provide crucial insights into how high-stakes examinations shape study routines and well-being, as their intensive preparation and success illuminate the exam’s demands on students. Students who achieved placement within the top 0.5% of the 2023 YKS exemplify a particular form of studenthood characterized by intensive academic commitment extending from primary school through university entrance. Their YKS preparation, typically beginning in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and intensifying to 8-17 daily study hours during the examination year, represents a mode of educational engagement where academic work largely fills all aspects of their lives. While a minority maintained equilibrium between study and leisure, class position

<sup>32</sup> ID 16

<sup>33</sup> ID 16

<sup>34</sup> ID 9,10,11, 16, 20

structured the cultural meanings of non-academic time: intellectual and civic engagement for working class and self-employed backgrounds versus activities for entertainment in higher classes.

The intersection of gender and class produced distinct patterns in how students articulated and experienced academic distress. Female students across class positions offered emotionally explicit narratives of psychological breakdown, while only working class male acknowledged similar vulnerability or emphasized emotional management strategies over affective disclosure. Future research should examine the impact of high-stakes examinations beginning at the primary school level. Additionally, the role of parental and institutional expectations in generating academic strain warrants dedicated investigation across diverse educational and social contexts.

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### Research Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Marmara University Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 29, Decision No. 31, May 7, 2025).

### Artificial Intelligence Use

The author state that generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) were used only for language editing during manuscript preparation. No AI-generated content was used for analysis or interpretation. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the content.

### Yazar Katkıları / Author Contributions

The author has accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission

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### Orcid

R. Erikli Doğan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0903-9078>

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