

Extended Abstract

The Perception of Imam Hatip Schools and Their Students in Turkey: A Sociological Evaluation on Some Basic Indicators*

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Abstract

The religion-oriented historical experience in Turkey has produced the phenomenon of Imam Hatip Schools, which have been shaped through their own unique characteristics that extend up to today. Imam Hatip Schools and their students' characteristics evolving through this historical experience have been able to transform into an element of identity and an original model of citizenship. The issue evident in various titles, such as Imam Hatip School students' level of religiosity, way of life, opinions on life, and political attitudes, has been internalized to the social structure of Turkey as much as it can rest upon an inherent factual reality. Being an Imam Hatip student, which can produce an original stance at a level able to exclude a social typology, can also generate a counterpart beyond just being a characteristic concerning the students from various angles in the eyes of other people who are not Imam Hatip students. In this sense, apart from being an educational institution, Imam Hatip Schools are also separate from other educational institutions through the counterpart it finds in society, because the values and qualities attributed to these schools in Turkey has been the source of a positive image of a common description that people from almost every group agree with. These characteristics also bring with them the perception of being an Imam Hatip student as an occasion of privilege. This reality, which has been determined through the research entitled "The Perception of Imam Hatip Schools and Imam Hatip Students in Turkey" and conducted with the support of Turkey's Imam-Hatipliler Foundation, is important in terms of reflecting the general perception of society. This article, which the related research forms the backbone of, aims to answer some claims recently mentioned in public and to pronounce some judgments by supporting these answers with concrete data. As such, the aim is to reveal the perception of Imam Hatip School and their students with the support of data obtained from sociological research. In addition, this study seeks to open a discussion about which values this perception covering Imam Hatip High Schools and their students is nurtured by, as well as by which cultural and ideological backgrounds. In the elongated discussion, however, the opportunity is sought to compare views from large public groups on this subject through the claims of some who hold views that feed the public over information and discourses that are not facts and those who reason with their own experience and perception against these claims. In this context, some indications will be analyzed with the purpose of drawing a specific framework.

Keywords

Imam Hatip High School • Identity • Social perception • Imam Hatip Pupilage • Education • School

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The phenomenon of the Imam Hatip Schools and their students, which forms the basis of this article, is an up-to-date topic of the academic agenda being worked on from various aspects. Research has been carried out on Imam Hatip Schools and their students, revolving especially around the headings of religion/values education; discussions on religiosity and secularism; examination of the relationship of modernization and religion; the relationships of political/ideological attitudes with religiosity, conservatism with religion, and education and identity; and more. However, the humanitarian aspects are, in short, almost absent from among the topics of academic studies, such who these students are; how they are the charges of one world; their fears, excitements, and aesthetic/art/literature interests; their inter-gender perceptions (girl/boy relations); their gender-role attitudes; their views on family/marriage and internal family roles; their educational expectations/issues; how they are perceived; how they see themselves in society; their cultural capital; their popular interests; and their civil/social activities. In the face of such a picture, finding the opportunity to extensively discuss and explain this topic is quite difficult. What this article wants to achieve is to create an axis of a social indicator that can draw attention to these headings and to open up new headings for different studies.

Sociological research has been carried out entitled “The Perception of Imam Hatip Schools and Their Students” (Özensel, 2012) and “Research on Turkey’s Imam Hatip High School Student Profile (Basic Issues, Expectations, and Value Structures)” (Özensel & Aydemir, 2014), the common feature of the two studies being examinations on axes such as education, social values, expectations, social perceptions, and so on before positioning Imam Hatip Schools and their students as any one political subject or actor of ideological debate. These studies detected publicly formed perceptions, rendered the political discourses that were produced to be understandable, demonstrated the student reality that prejudiced discussions had missed, and partly met their aim. In this context, they tried to explain/answer some areas of questions and issues by identifying them through the research data mentioned within the writing. Some of these questions/issues were: Who are Imam Hatip students? What social classes do they come from? How are their family structures? Do these students have a quality that is inherited from the family? What kind of image do these students have in society? Do they experience problems establishing ties with society? What level is their reputation? By which value judgments are they remembered? What are the elements that identify the educational content given in these schools? What are people’s expectations from the schools? How are they different from other schools? Are these schools necessary? Should the schools be changed, transformed, or even closed?

Prior to February 28, 1997, the most obvious aspect of the IHL student profile was that a significant portion of the children were village children or children of families

who had recently migrated to the city from a village. These days, however, one of IHL students' most prominent characteristics is that they have been born in a city or their parents have lived in a city for a long time. This situation allows us to observe the change in itself experienced in Imam Hatip Schools because both the generational differences and the family and origin differences are clues to the changes in students' cultural characteristics and ways in which they perceive the world. The changes and transformations that are experienced at times such as these demonstrate that Imam Hatip students have carried differences between generations. The definition of "Imam Hatip Generation," which is frequently spoken in public, possesses just such an indicator value. Yet in order to be able to produce a proper understanding of this, periodic variables must be identified, the schools' and children's characteristic qualities must be examined according to generations, and changing student typologies must be extracted. The perception of the Imam Hatip generation, whose resolution has been attempted through a general overview, may be misleading. In short, Imam Hatip students and their generations, with their story of over a century, must try to be examined and understood on the basis of their differences. However, the perceptions of Imam Hatip schools and of their students that are produced through heroism-loaded or negatively prejudiced discourses shows that the work that has been done is not yet sufficient in this direction.

Some of the opinions shared in public such as Imam Hatip pupilage being understood as a nervousness, seeing these schools and their students as actors of a world closed to themselves, family pressure being the rationale for students being in Imam Hatip Schools, and more, even if the counterpoint is partially found, must be identified as a product of a rather problematic view. A process of identity acquisition that can be valid for almost every school can also have mutual meaning for Imam Hatip Schools. A significant sociological result of the socialization process that has been developed over educational institutions is the emergence of a personality construction in the context of identity and belonging. A bond can certainly be established between youths and educational institutions over results like the development of youths' values in the process of education, acquiring the elements of personality, the emergence of a sense of belonging, the construction of political or ideological identities, and defining a cultural space that is compatible with life style. Titled descriptions with names that are mentioned in forms such as preparatory school, science high school, military high school, vocational high school and so on transform the perception of an identity to an element of belonging that also emphasizes the meanings and expectations uploaded to it. In this sense, evaluating descriptive elements that identify with being an "Imam Hatip student" and that exceed the meaning of being a student in an educational institution of its dimensions is possible within social typologies (Aydemir, 2016). This situation, which is the subject at stake, is revealed as one of image and perception. Evaluating schools and students within the component of one identity determines the

level of meaning and expectations that are uploaded to it. In this respect, a whole slew of real or exaggerated rumors have been produced related to the general perception and image of Imam Hatip Schools and students.

From time to time transcendent qualifications appear at the head of this acceptance, such as Imam Hatip students being absolutely good and qualified, that they're always far from sin and the taboo, that they exhibit strict religious tendencies, that society has high morals and is a carrier of values, and so on. Clearly such discourse has the good intention of praising students, yet this may cause these students, being ordinary people, to fall to an internal tension. The expectation that Imam Hatip youths pass character into their life that is seen to possess the representative skill of high ideals, be practically free from weakness, and be rendered unfettered from sin clearly will give birth to serious pressures over them. One can see that high-level expectations such as these are a justifiable reason for an attitude that hides being an Imam Hatip student. This situation can cause one to forget that Imam Hatip students are able to draw an average student profile with ordinary expectations, demands, and issues.

Contrary to all positive evaluations, one can talk about assumptions that have been shared in public that can clearly be counted as negative. Criticisms also need to be mentioned in the form of how Imam Hatip students have a closed inner structure, rather than staying in society in general they remain as a limited part of society, they do not respect anyone but themselves, they are people of society who possess neither democratic attitudes nor culture, and they have a religious understanding and culture that is open to terrorism. When looking at the data obtained in response to all these assertions, being Imam Hatip students themselves personally is accepted synonymously with being reliable. In this sense, that 49.2% of those who participated in the survey thought "IHL students/graduates will not become involved in terrorism," and 59.4% thought "The rate of crime among Imam Hatip students is low," is quite meaningful when also taking into account the percentages of those who did not submit ideas on these matters. Lastly, what supports the data is the indicator of credibility. Accordingly, for 56.4% of the participants, being an Imam Hatip student is to say one is trustworthy.

Imam Hatip Schools are an educational institution affiliated with the Ministry of National Education, and most certainly the students of these schools are young individuals whose education levels have been evaluated through their certain success and capacity of knowledge. From this angle, when political and ideological tensions are left out of the picture, the school and students' ideals are considered important in the name of the university and the academic future. In terms of ideals and concern for the future, Imam Hatip students have the same expectations as students from other schools.

Expectations that develop due to the possibilities of formal education bear the quality of a response to other negative prejudices that were again identified in the public opinion. Allegations, in the form of children's parents sending them to these schools only for the sake of religious education, these schools only needing to provide religious education, and the students being anti-secularist people who have ideals and values that conflict with the basic values of the Republic, were voiced in the public opinion. The data evaluated in this manner reveals a picture in contrast to the assertions.

Imam Hatip Schools, being an educational institution as well as a counterpart to what is found in society, are separate from other educational institutions because the values and characteristics attributed to these schools in Turkey have a positive image that is aligned through a common description by almost all groups of people. These characteristics bring together how being an Imam Hatip student is perceived as a privilege. This fact, which has been detected through research, is significant in terms of reflecting the general perception of society.