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GAP YEAR TREND AS A SOCIOLOGICAL PHENOMENON IN EDUCATION

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To the Graduate School of Educational Sciences of Ankara University,

This study titled " Gap Year Trend as a Sociological Phenomenon of Education", prepared by Suat Aksu, was unanimously accepted as a **Master's Thesis** by the members of the jury in the Department of Educational Sciences / the Program of Sociology of Education.

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APPROVAL

This thesis was accepted by the jury members on 17/08/2021 and by the Graduate School of Administrative Board on …/…/20... in accordance with the relevant articles of the Graduate Education Regulations of Ankara University.

……

Prof. Dr. Yasemin KEPENEKCİ

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STATEMENT OF COMPLIANCE WITH THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

I hereby declare that I have reported all the information in the thesis in accordance with the academic writing rules and that I have obtained and presented them in accordance with ethical principles (including all cited works in the sources, accessing the information and documents used in the thesis through official means and using them without destroying the originals, etc.).

Suat Aksu

ÖZET

EĞİTİMİN SOSYOLOJİK BİR FENOMENİ OLARAK MEZUNA KALMA AKIMI

AKSU, Suat
Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Eğitim Bilimleri Anabilim Dalı
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Günümüzde gençler, yükseköğretime geçiş sürecinde geleceğe yönelik rasyonel kararlar almaya çalışmaktadırlar. Bu bağlamda, gençler arasında yüksek öğrenime başlamadan önce mezuna kalma olarak adlandırılan, bir veya birkaç yıl eğitim hayatına ara verme eğilimi vardır. Her yıl üniversiteye giriş sınavına tekrar giren aday sayısının arttığı göz ününde bulundurulduğunda, mezuna kalma akımı liseden mezun olan gençler tarafından sıklıkla tercih edilen sosyolojik bir fenomen olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Üniversite sınavına tekrar hazırlanma sürecine giren 24 lise mezunu ile gerçekleştirilen bu çalışmada, gençlerin mezuna kalma sürecinde yaşadıkları deneyimler açığa çıkarılmıştır. Fenomenolojik olarak tasarlanmış bu çalışmanın bulguları gençlerin akademik performansı, mezuna kalma kararları, mezuna kalma aktiviteleri ve Türkiye'de mezuna kalma algısı temaları altında toplanmıştır. Gençlerin geleceğe yönelik kararlarını şekillendiren unsurların en başta gelenleri, ülkelerindeki istihdam oranları, okul, aile ve arkadaşlarının yönlendirmeleri olduğu görülmüştür. Türkiye'deki boşluk yılında adayların hayallerindeki mesleği yapabilmek veya seçkin bir meslek sahibi olabilmek için üniversite giriş sınavından daha yüksek puan almayı ve büyük şehirlerdeki elit üniversitelere girme yarışında olduklarını ifade etmişlerdir. Böylelikle, lise mezunlarının zaman ve emek harcadıkları bir ara yılı yoğunlukla akademik beceri gelişimi için harcadıkları görülmüştür. Gençlerin arzu edilen kariyer hedeflerinin boşluk yılında gerçekleştirilen faaliyetlerle ne derece örtüştüğünün anlaşılması, liseden yükseköğretime geçiş sürecinin daha iyi yönetilmesine katkı sağlayacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Lise mezunu, Yükseköğretime Geçiş, Mezuna kalmak, Üniversite Giriş Sınavı, Fenomenoloji.

ABSTRACT

GAP YEAR TREND AS A SOCIOLOGICAL PHENOMENON OF EDUCATION

AKSU, Suat

Master's Degree, Department of Educational Sciences

Advisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sever

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Nowadays, young people are trying to make rational decisions for the future during the transition to higher education. In this context, there is a trend among young people to take a break from education for one or more years, which is called gap year before starting higher education. Considering that the number of candidates who retake the university entrance exam increases every year, the trend of gap year emerges as a sociological phenomenon that is frequently preferred by young people who have graduated from high school. This study was carried out with 24 high school graduates who were in the process of preparing for the university entrance exam again to understand their experiences during gap year. The study was phenomenologically designed and the findings were gathered under the themes of academic performance of young people, their gap year decision, their graduation activities and the perception of gap year in Turkey. It has been seen that the most important factors shaping the future decisions of young people are the employment rates in their countries, the guidance of their school, family and friends. In the gap year in Turkey, candidates stated that they are in the marathon to get a higher score in the university entrance exam and enter elite universities in big cities in order to be able to do their dream job or have an elite profession. Thus, it has been observed that high school graduates take a gap year for the development of academic skills intensively. Understanding to what extent the desired career goals of the youth dovetail with the activities carried out in the gap year will contribute to better management of the transition from high school to higher education.

Key Words: High School Graduates, Transition to Higher Education, Gap year, University Entrance Exam, Phenomenology.

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To Turkish youth who struggle to find their passion…

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has an enormous value for young people who want to take a place in the technocracy train that is constantly moving forward with new wagons being added every day. The ticket is documented skills namely credentials to get on that train. Young people try to gain more credentials to sit in more elite wagons and this situation is called the "myth of technocracy" by Collins (1979). The role of higher education has transformed from being functionalist to pragmatist one in a credential society. Nowadays, young people endeavor to make rational decisions regarding the future by considering employment rates of their home country. Therefore, they decide for their future career goals under the guidance of school, family, and friends during the transition to higher education. In this context, there is a growing trend among young people whether to take a gap year before starting higher education (Coetzee & Bester, 2009).

While the phenomenon of gap year varies in the country context, gap year decision is more widespread in the USA (O'Shea, 2014), the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand (Ahlgren, 2006), and China (Tian & Ran, 2017). Gap year is preferably associated with the decision of young people who graduated from high school or university. Adults in business life take a gap year, as well. Since this study focused on the experiences of high school graduates, the meaning of gap year is defined as a decision that having one or more years break before registering a higher education institution. Although the definition of gap year changes over time, it means not only an academic break for preparing for university entrance exam but also includes activities such as travelling, volunteering activities, participating in various social responsibility projects, internships etc. (Tian & Ran, 2017).

The related term of gap year is called *mezuna kalmak* in Turkey. The emergence of the term *mezuna kalmak* has a negative meaning and the term refers to a period defined as; 'not able to pass the university entrance exam; not able to enroll in a university; staying as a high school graduate'. Thus, it is estimated that there are salient factors behind the emergence of this term which is perceived negatively. Consequently, the phenomenon is

worthwhile to be searched in order to comprehend the meaning of gap year and transition experiences of young people in Turkey.

Statement of the Problem

Educational attainment is associated with having a reasonable score in the state exams of the countries. To step up to the next level, students must pass the state exam with a score that is over the threshold. Preparing for the state exams also needs a disciplined study plan during the transition to higher education of young people. As sometimes students fail to pass the first attempt, the university entrance exam can be severely stressful. These exams are challenging for the young people to get a desirable education for the following levels (Aypay & Sever, 2015). Significantly, students determine their future career in these exams and naturally they have major crises during the process (Lüle, 2002). According to the statistics of participation in the university entrance exam, a considerable part of the candidates are high school graduates who are unsettled or unregistered in higher education institutions (OSYM, 2021).

The national university entrance exam is administered in Turkey under the Article 45 of the Higher Education Act of 2547 by the Higher Education Council (YOK). It is an exam which is prepared and evaluated by the Measurement Selection and Placement Centre of Turkey (OSYM) called the Higher Education Institutions Examination (YKS). It is applied at the end of each academic year to enroll students in higher education programs according to their university preferences by considering their exam results (OSYM, 2021). However, either unavoidably or intentionally, some candidates decide to take an academic break that is called gap year (Jones, 2004). Although the phenomenon of gap year has various meanings in the country context, Turkish high school graduates spend that period retaking the university entrance exam either because they do not prefer to enroll in a university or could not reach the threshold score of the exam. However, social conditions of Turkish young people and messages received from their environment have an undeniable role in retaking the exam.

While the transition period to higher education should motivate students to prolong their studies, unexpected psychological and sociological problems of youth are overlooked during the transition to university. Psychological processes of high school graduates have been studied on the titles of such as the relationships between the levels of self-perception and psychiatric symptoms of students who are preparing for the

university entrance exam (Lüle, 2002), the relation between the levels of adolescents' self-perception and life satisfaction (Erol, Çelik & Üçok, 2015) and the relation between the level of anxiety and the level of autonomy of young people (Barlas, Karaca, Onan, & Işıl, 2010). Besides, Çınar (2006) expressed the impacts of the university entrance exam on candidates. If students do not manage to prepare for the university entrance exam, they face some situations, for example, several attempts to prepare for the exam, being enrolled in a new private course, dropping out of education, finding a job or conflict with family. It can be understood that the students decide about their future career under some circumstances.

As the number of the candidates who retake the university entrance exam increase per year, there is a need for understanding how it operates. It is observed that candidates aim to achieve a high score to pursue their dreams and enter an elite university instead of developing their professional and social skills during the gap year in Turkey. They spend the year by improving only their academic skills. This situation requires questioning the purposes of a gap year that high school graduates spend time and effort for. In this regard, the study examined to what extent the desired career goals of high school graduates matched the activities performed during the gap year.

Purpose of the Study

The study focuses on revealing experiences of high school graduates who have decided to take a gap year and find out the meaning of that time span in Turkey. During the gap year, experiences and meaning making of the graduates have been examined with phenomenology. The main aim of the study is to interpret how high school graduates understand the experiences of gap year in the transition from high school to university. Three main questions have been determined to follow out the aims of this study. Throughout the study, social status of high school graduates, their gap year experiences and received messages from their environment during the gap year were analyzed with following three questions;

1. How is the decision of a gap year taken before attending a university?
2. What are the experiences of high school graduates during the gap year?
3. How is the meaning of the gap year revealed from the perspectives of high school graduates?

Also the study investigates a sub-question which is ‘does the increasing number of high school graduates indicate a delay in higher education or the pursuit of a better career?’ to make thought-provoking implications regarding the views of young people towards education.

Significance of the Study

To illustrate rates of high school graduates who have entered university entrance exam, statistics of OSYM have been used throughout the study. Four types of candidates defined in the section titled "who can apply for the exam?" in the 2020 YKS Guidebook, which is published by the official web page of OSYM;

1. Students in the final year of secondary schools (high schools or equivalent schools, open education high schools) in the 2019-2020 academic year,
2. Those who are in the last year of secondary schools (suspended student),
3. Those who have completed secondary schools,
4. Those who complete their secondary education abroad and whose status meets one of the above (OSYM, 2021).

Another document published by OSYM contains statistical information regarding the results of candidates’ placement according to YKS 2020. Here, candidates who applied for the exam were categorized in five different categories which are;

1. High School Senior,
2. High School Graduate (Unsettled or Unregistered in Higher Education),
3. University Student,
4. University Graduate,
5. Deleted Registration from Higher Education (OSYM, 2021).

According to Table 1, the high percentage of candidates applying for the university exam is the “High School Graduates (Unsettled or Unregistered in Higher Education)” from the previous years. In particular, this rate has increased significantly in the last two years. Although the total number of candidates is approximately 100.000

people lower than the previous year, high school graduates (unsettled or unregistered in higher education) increased about 50.000 people more than the previous year in 2020. Therefore, in order to exhibit the significance of the study, it has been examined how high school graduates manage the process of gap year wisely based on their experiences.

Table 1

The Total Number of Candidates, High School Graduates and Percentages Who Took the Exam Between 2011-2020

Exam Year	Total Candidates	Unsettled or Unregistered High School Graduates	Percentages (%)
2011 ÖSYS	1.759.998	518.241	29.44
2012 ÖSYS	1.895.479	562.921	29.69
2013 ÖSYS	1.924.550	606.266	31.50
2014 ÖSYS	2.086.115	635.164	30.44
2015 ÖSYS	2.126.670	630.635	29,65
2016 ÖSYS	2.256.377	633.187	28.06
2017 ÖSYS	2.265.844	632.722	27.92
2018 YKS	2.381.412	791.929	33.25
2019 YKS	2.528.031	916.601	36,25
2020 YKS	2.436.958	963.240	39.53

(OSYM, 2021a)

Limitations

This research reveals the experiences of young people who reside in Turkey during their gap year period. The research data is limited to the questions in the interview form. The conclusions and generalizations that were made from the answers of the young people are valid only for the research's working group. Making the research more plausible would require finding participants from all over the country. Nevertheless, when the time and cost factors were evaluated, it was decided to conduct the study with the young people residing in Ankara, İstanbul, Konya, Yalova, Giresun, Gaziantep, Diyarbakır and Siirt. In addition, other people from youth's environment, such as parents, instructors, or guidance teachers of young people might be included in the research. Since the research does not deviate from its purpose and each working group requires different and more comprehensive studies, the research population is limited to high school graduates.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, relevant theoretical and conceptual concepts have been clarified regarding the thesis topic. Since the study explores the meaning of gap year experiences of high school graduates, sociological implications of education give clear understanding of the theoretical perspectives of the youth. Therefore, the theoretical framework has been demonstrated with Collins's (1979) credentialism theory. To give a clearer understanding, educational reproduction has been explained before delving into educational credentialism. Since the gap year phenomenon is perceived as a decision which is made during transition from high school to university, the term of educational transition has been clarified in the conceptual framework part. Due to the fact that gap year people hold a status of not in education, employment and work (NEET), the concept of NEET has been defined. Finally, the characterization of gap year has been elucidated based on the literature by giving examples of different country contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Education and Reproduction

Education needs to be analyzed with sociological perspectives to understand whether education is worthwhile for people or not. From the functionalist point of view, education has crucial importance in improving children's skills, knowledge and moral values in alignment with experiencing socialization in society. In this way, children learn to be responsive citizens regarding social rules by experiencing the integration role of education (Giddens & Sutton, 2009). Also, education is an instrument for transmitting cultural knowledge to the next generations. As an institutionalized form of education, schools enable children to acquire necessary knowledge for life and transfer cultural norms under the monitoring of educational authorities. As the transmitting of culture is emphasized, schools accept and control children as a receiver of cultural values, and

concomitantly students acquire traditionally shaped knowledge and transfer reorganized new cultures to the next generation (Taba, 1962).

While the functionalist perspective acknowledges that education furnishes people as the country's human capital because of society's needs for a professional and qualified labor force, the conflict perspective advocates that education is an instrument for transmitting society's dominant culture to students. Conflict theory highlights that the accessibility of educational opportunities is unequal and stratified among minority groups by teaching the culture of elite people (Schaffer, 2018). Therefore, schools play a central role in stratification by considering economic, social and cultural differences in society. School is a mechanism of cultural and economic protection and distribution as an implementer of a well-designed curriculum. Hence, as a social institution, school forms knowledge and teaches both academic knowledge and cultural values overtly or covertly by staffing teachers and trainers for the teaching process. In doing so, the school can be seen as a tool of cultural distribution. Thus, the concepts of ideology, hegemony and selective traditions are politically and analytically critical in the questioning of school culture. Apple (1990) defines the economic and cultural domination in school with the 'hegemony' concept. The problem of hegemony in education has three typical functions. It always concerns legitimation, power conflict and a special style of arguments. Schools select, preserve and distribute the selected cultures to students and as Antonio Gramsci claims it, this increases the ideological dominance of certain classes on cultural knowledge (Apple, 1990).

Despite the fact that education has responsibilities about knowledge and skill development based on the pre-designed school curriculum, school lacks to counterbalance society's heterogeneous structure with numerous social groups who have diverse social backgrounds and interests. Therefore, the conflict perspective explains the discrepancies between education and the schooling system in industrialized societies by clarifying the social inequalities of education. Even though education is a macro term for fulfilling people's educational necessities and broadening the vision about self, life course, culture and society, the institutionalized structure of school has completely taken the functions of education on itself. It is not clear whether school provides education, but nowadays, the perception about school is equal to education itself. The school is busy with creating an overcrowded curriculum for students to get more credentials than needed by serving reproduction of education. Therefore, another theory which develops under

the conflict perspective within the idea of the cultural reproduction of education is credentialism (Giddens & Sutton, 2009).

The structure of education is shaped by protecting stratification of power behind providing so-called equity. In that system, credentials are the abstract currency to guarantee the reproduction of social inequality by promoting the owner of more cultural capital. The credentials stand for educational titles, which are the symbolic functions of individual capabilities. This legitimation contributes covertly to the distribution of powers among classes by perpetuating the reproduction role of education (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Thus, social reproduction secretly promotes the belief that the parental social class is the prominent factor to demonstrate a student's success at school. The pivotal implication on social reproduction stated by Pierre Bourdieu is middle or higher class parents provide more auspicious schooling experience compared to children of working-class parents (Farkas, 2018).

Reproduction theorists focus on culturally shaped education mechanisms by asking which knowledge is transferred to students and which types of students learn well. The initial question of the reproduction theory, which Bourdieu asks, is that while middle-class children smoothly acquire knowledge taught in school, working-class parents' children strive to get educational qualifications during their education process. However, middle-class families communicate with their children by promoting self-confidence, equality, freedom or creativity; working-class children are introduced to the concepts of regulations, control, orders or restrictions. In this regard, students reflect on the questions or topics that teachers direct them at school using their cultural capital. The school system neglects the differences between students' class or background due to the overcrowded structure of the pre-designed curriculum that contains both intellectual knowledge and hidden features. Also, the school system determines the level of success by blaming students after evaluating their exam grades and their performance in class. Consequently, school activities reproduce class inequalities and contribute to social stratification covertly (Ballantine, Hammack & Stuber, 2017).

However, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) stated that the traditional education system assumes that students have enough cultural capital, but school anticipates having those cultural capitals implicitly rather than explicitly and generally enriches students with expected cultural capital. If students have trouble fulfilling school's expectations in terms of academic success, language usage, social cohesion or behaviors and attitudes in class, they are in the backstage among their peers. The concept of cultural capital is

defined as a form of symbolic legacies achieved in the education system with the contribution of family and social environment. School assesses students according to what they have learnt at school. However, the pre-gained cultural capital enables students to access better success levels at school compared to their peers. According to Bourdieu & Passerson (1990), success is not related to students' brilliance, and it is about the cultural capital that they have outside of school. Thus, cultural capital refers to the intellectual background of students created by their usage of language, physical image, educational skills, communication level of family members, what they wear or what they eat out of school (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1990). Cultural capital comprises diplomas or certificates such as the end result of degrees, training or credentials (Giddens & Sutton, 2009). Thus, the cultural capital means a person's knowledge, competences, desires, education level and all the credentials or soft skills that they have in their personal background.

Education affirms that the cultural capital contributes to reproduction of class relations. Accordingly, what education demands from individuals is competencies and skills that people should have acquired outside of the school environment rather than what they instill institutionally (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Consequently, the education system denies expectations of students who are not equipped with accepted cultural capital. School is designed to reproduce the dominant culture, and it constructs a system of relations between social classes that differ in predisposition to this dominant culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Individuals learn certain behavioral patterns or attitudes that school can accept or reject in their social context. Yet, based on the arguments of cultural capital, it might be said that while school is a suitable environment for individuals who possess the required cultural competencies, it may be a disadvantage for individuals who do not have cultural capital as they are neglected in the school culture.

Educational Credentialism

Educational attainment is the critical turning point of life for people to gain more credentials which would provide better job and class position in the future. One of the most supportive arguments defined by Dore (1976) about credentialism is diploma disease, and it explains that education is transformed by a mentality of what is learned instead of the reason why it is learned. Thus, the schools are an authority to provide documented credentials required to proceed with the next level of education or enter the

job market. In this respect, students are the victims of schools by focusing on gaining pre-designed and demanded credentials to hold a diploma from the school rather than acquiring core values of education (Dore, 1976). Therefore, schools prepare students to get more so-called valid credentials to take one step further on the hierarchic class division. This situation creates cultural currency which is an abstract term for defining credentials that would benefit students in the future. This belief causes another problematic issue which is the acceleration of a competitive system among students. In doing so, students strive to be more successful by aiming to get higher points from examinations rather than acquiring scientific knowledge.

Likewise, promoting educational credentials perpetuates class stratification by supporting a sophisticated bureaucratic style of the business world. However, the accessibility of education has become more prevalent, children of higher classes could find much more opportunities than children of lower classes along the way of saving those credentials (Collins, 1979). Collins clarifies that credential inflation creates an environment that accepts people who have more occupational or organizational resources by promoting educational stratification. Within the impact of stratification on the job market, credentialism might be considered inegalitarian as it creates a society that has income inequality (Hill, 2020).

Although the functionalist theory states improvements in people's level of education are necessary to be a well-developed society, credentialism asserts that there is no strong hypothesis which claims that modern-day jobs demand more advanced skills than their prior requirements from the view of the conflict theory. While new technological developments create a more effortless working environment for employees and most occupations do not require advanced skills, today’s job market seeks people who have much more credentials than their competitors (Andres, 2016). Notwithstanding, a high school diploma was quite a nice qualification for employers almost half a century ago, now it is an absolute requirement to be employed. This transformation is the representation of sharply rising credentialism in society (Schaffer, 2018).

To give an up-to-date example of credentialism theory, young people decide their future careers by evaluating society’s perceptions of status, money, work environment or job security. In this regard, occupational monopolies are medicine, law, and engineering lead the society’s perception in terms of providing culturally accepted higher class position, better financial situation and self-actualization. Transformation of the credential system for many decades is seen as inflation of education. Although the completion of

high school or university has imperative status to get a position in the job market, now high school graduation or even elite universities could not guarantee future employability of the youth. Consequently, the race to enter more elite universities pushes young people to be in a competitive system that requires them to have the admission criteria of dominant institutions (Collins, 1979).

The widely highlighted issue is whether education prepares students to acquire necessary skills for work or not. These achieved skills are the leading agents of people's professional success. Therefore, education determines success by creating a skills hierarchy, and educational acquisitions are essential for obtaining the high-skilled positions in that hierarchy. Here, an irrational belief comes out regarding creating differences among other competitors based on collecting more credentials at school, if the educational credentials are the currency for being admitted to higher educational institutions or companies (Collins, 1979). According to Collins (1979), this is an illusion in the modern job market which is called the myth of technocracy. Employers restrict entry to professions that require high income and prestige by asking for highly achieved certificates and diplomas. From another perspective, the myth of technocracy states that the young people are deprived of doing a simple job because they do not have the necessary educational credentials instead of being employed by doing the stuff they can easily do (Tan, 1990). Thus, many people have received redundant education and study so hard to get a few jobs that are not too complicated. From another view, educational attainment has a strong correlation with people's future position in industrial societies. If a prospective candidate of a company has more educational credentials compared to other candidates, the probability of obtaining that job is higher than others, regardless of their work performance or trainability of candidates (Kerckhoff, 2000).

According to Collins (1979), to be in the credential society is an illogical perception of people with an effort to obtain a desirable job position in the business sector. This effort is lavish for collecting redundant credentials instead of gaining worthwhile knowledge for people's interests. Credential society generates a more destructive environment for minority groups due to they have to resist bureaucratic relations and dominance (Andres, 2016). There is a perception that the importance of education is recognized which is that young people struggle to acquire more credentials than is necessary for success. The validity of this perception is connected with employers' efforts by unnecessarily enhancing the job requirements due to preventing the excessive application of employers (Wallace & Wolf, 1995). Despite the fact that people aim at

having a more profitable occupation with an elite status by getting more credentials in educational institutions, most skills that are necessary for professional and managerial positions are acquired at the job itself. Hence, educational credentials are generally irrelevant when it is evaluated from the perspective of job productivity. That is the reason why vocational and technical training requires work experience rather than theoretical school education. On the other hand, one of the main missions of schools is grading students by testing with oral or paper-based examinations that contain what is learned in class. In this regard, young people perceive success and creativity by measuring the results of exams while they are in school or moving up to a higher education level (Collins, 1979).

According to Collins (1979), the competitive system has been aiming at improving educational qualifications which produce an abstract and cultural currency in the credential society. As the education system proceeds to generate more credentials, business life demands people who have more credentials as well (Khoo, 2019). However, Collins (1979) claimed that most jobs no longer needed distinctively precise skills. Moreover, Collins's updated arguments are still constant. Collins stated that content of education is not overwhelmingly set by technological competencies; most technological skills - especially the most advanced ones - are learned at work or through informal networks (Collins, 2013). In this respect, it is obviously seen that higher education is a part of credential society. Understanding the experiences of young people during the transition to higher education emerges as a worthwhile discussion.

Conceptual Framework

Transition from High School to University

People have four main distinct transition processes in education. Children start schools under the policies of compulsory education of countries. The very beginning of school is defined as the transition from childhood to be a student (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993). This is the first transition period of children in their education life. After being a student in primary school, the next step is secondary education which may differentiate whether compulsory or not at the inner country level. Passing from primary school to secondary school is the second transition period of students in education (Benner, 2011). The third transition period is evaluated in continuing to higher education. The transition

from secondary school to university is a highly important term for young people (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007). During this period, they seek a new identity, developing a character and leading their future according to their preferences. Young people decide about their future with the help of their interests and career goals by evaluating conditions of socio-economic status of their household or country's economic circumstances. In this regard, if young people prefer to enroll in school, they continue until the completion of their desired first, second and third cycle of education. Afterward, graduates join the job market based on their qualifications. Thus, the last transition period is defined as from school to work (Kerckhoff, 2000). According to the purposes of this study, students' experiences of gap year are connected with their transition from secondary education to higher education by the impact of contemplating a transition from higher education to the job market. Thus, it is essential to explore what criteria might be crucial for future career preferences of young graduates.

NEET (Not in Education, Employment and Work)

To be out of school is an apprehensive status for the youth in society as an interest of education, economy, and relevant policymaking. The term is also related to the sociology of education discipline. Some young people are interestingly neither in high school nor university. Out of school youth is a potential risk for the governments in terms of decreasing the human capital of the society. While this cohort can contribute to the economy, welfare or other social affairs by serving their labor for some purposes, out-of-school youth are neither in school, training, work nor anywhere else. On the other hand, this status is frightfully free to direct and adapt to any type of activities such as addictions, behavioral disorders, anomie, even crime and other possible risks (Cárdenas, Hoyos & Székely, 2015).

In this respect, some young people leave education after graduation from high school and they are defined as NEETs. NEET is defined as a person who is neither in employment, education nor training activities. Although the characterization differentiates in a country context, the main notion of this status is that they represent the inactive population of people. These rates are evaluated by the countries classifying with age and gender mainly. While research shows the NEET rates by indicating the age range between the 15-24 and some others accept in the 15-29 age range. Meanwhile, the term is primarily related to young people and countries trying to develop policies to include

these passive people in the job market, education or training activities in order to diminish the NEET rates. Therefore, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014) reports one of the main social self-sufficiency indicators is NEET rates as an economic crisis of countries. Attendance in the job market, being a student or joining training activities are crucial to developing the quality of the labor market of the countries. In so doing, countries might solve one of the central problems that is self-sufficiency of young people at the political, social and economic level. Countries that have high NEET rates demonstrate that they have high unemployment rate and low educational attainment (OECD, 2014). While the intensity of the problems changes at the national level, NEETs are a risk for not only the job market but also the social exclusion of the youth. NEET people have the potential to feel precarious and vulnerable due to living in poverty, lack of social support and education or being a migrant (Elder, 2015).

Turkey has the highest rate of NEETs compared to other developing countries. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTATS) The NEET rates of 15-24 aged young people has been demonstrated in Table 2. According to the most up-to-date study "Youth and COVID-19: Access to Decent Jobs Amid the Pandemic*"* (ILO, 2021), the NEET population of both native and immigrant communities dramatically influences the labor force and literacy level of Turkey. Another indicator is that the highest gender gap is a result of low educational attainment and downsized participation in the labor market of female young people. For these reasons, young people who have NEET status illustrate the inactivity of the youth that causes psychological, sociological and economic problems for society (ILO, 2021).

Table 2

Young people aged 15 - 24 neither in employment nor in education or training in Turkey, 2016-2020

Years	NEET Rates %	NEET Rates Men %	NEET Rates Women %
2016	24,0	14,6	33,5
2017	24,2	14,6	34,0
2018	24,5	15,6	33,6
2019	26,0	18,3	34,0
2020	28,3	21,2	35,7

(TURKSTATS, 2021)

Regarding NEET in Turkey, Susanli (2016) studied the NEETs' status between 2004 and 2013 and she found three main results that the larger part of the NEET cohort is accepted as passive citizens and has no active participation in labor, education or other institutions. Moreover, this status is more widespread for women. The second finding is that to refrain from NEET status, young people prefer to be in education more than previous times thereby young people's transition to the labor market is delayed and this situation decreases the employment level of young people. The last implication of the study is that although there are apparent improvements to change the status of unemployed people to employed ones, the transition from school to work applications stays stable even after the economic recessions in Turkey. Finally, the convenient suggestions to mediate the NEET rates to promote education, provide accessibility of educational materials, ensure equality in education and provide successful school-to-work transition at the practical and political level (Susanli, 2016).

Gap Year

The gap year youth might be seen as a category for out-of-school youth in the literature when looking at the preferences of the youth. The gap year has been studied from various points of view by researchers and the term is blurred and has a broad sense. According to a formal definition provided by Jones (2004) the gap year is "any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes 'out' of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory" (p.8). In addition, Jones's review has a key aim to provide a descriptive categorization for understanding the gap year people between the age of 16-25 in the context of policy.

Research of Review of Gap Year Provision by Andrew Jones (2004) contributes to the existing literature into alternatives of gap year in the UK. In this paper, the term 'gap year' is used for describing a youth phenomenon and the study provides a reference document to notify authorities and further research. Young people take a year out and decide to take a gap year for a variety of reasons, such as voluntary work, learning, organized travel, paid work, independent travel and leisure activities. Jones (2004) categorized the benefits of gap year as being; "on the benefits to society of gap years" and "on the benefits to participants" (p.53). While he explains the benefits of a gap year, he indicates the evidence of UK-based volunteering comes with lots of support for the

youth. Besides, authorities believe travelling and free-time activities enable a reasonable advantage to society, in other way exposure to different cultures and meeting with people from another country may have a favorable impact on the UK society in the long run. In terms of the participant, Jones identified a wide range of advantages showed in a variety of keywords which are "formation & development of career choices, improved 'employability' and career opportunities, non-academic skills and qualifications and life skills" (independence, ability to make a decision, problem-solving, self-discipline, communication skills, managing money, leadership skills, the development of interpersonal skills) (Jones, 2004: pp:53-54).

Another research focusing on the increasing popularity of pre-university gap year among British youth states that with the many opportunities of gaining new skills for a future career, the gap year has a critical role in making a categorization among other students in developing competition for employment to elite institutions (Heath, 2007). In the same way, Tian and Ran (2017) accepted the definition of the gap year as a prominent feature of career development for students. Within the benefits of gap year, activities are just not limited to travelling or leisure time activities. It has various internship programs or factory practises, as well. A number of factors play a role in determining the effects of gap year such as it can enhance the chance of employability by ensuring that the resume is filled with worthwhile activities. However, there is less research on the topic of a gap year and most studies recently are from England, Australia, America, Canada, other developing countries in South America and Africa and China (Tian & Ran, 2017).

Mouraz & Araujo (2017) studied gap year in Portugal as well. In their paper, they have tried to understand to what extent the experience of the gap year determines and improves the autonomy of young people using the qualitative method with interviewing their close friends, relatives and a legal person from a provider company of gap year activities of 'gappers'. They define the student who takes a year out as a gapper. All of the evidence is positive and approved that the gappers changed in terms of autonomy and citizenship and social commitment before starting their higher education process. In a broad perspective, the three factors that make benefits for young people's development are academic, personal skills and motivation. The gap year advantage for all of the gappers as a supporter for their higher education process to gain much more abilities like autonomy, communication, leadership, organization and teamwork. Thus, they are extremely motivated to embody their dreams and find more energy for fulfilling educational aims through life (Mouraz & Araujo, 2017).

Candidates who are in the process of passing to higher education in the US apply according to the results of SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test). Many universities in the United States open applications based on the highest SAT score, not based on the latest SAT score, and American education policies support the decision to retake the exam (Frisanchoa, Krishnab, Lychaginc, & Yavas, 2016). To understand the reason why the candidates retake the exam, it will be useful to observe their socio-economic backgrounds. If parents have a high level of education and income, the candidate's tendency to retake the exam is higher than that of a working-class family. Because retaking shows a 5% increase in learning outcomes and it is possible that retaking the exam may be an advantage for families who care about education. Another advantage of retaking is that it allows the removal of prejudices regarding the quality difference between schools due to the fact that there is a large amount of time in preparation for the new exam without going to school. Moreover, it has been found that socio-economically disadvantaged candidates retaking the exam are more successful when they retake the exam (Frisanchoa, et. al, 2016).

One of the most critical findings in the gap year came with research conducted by Snee (2010). Snee (2010) states that 'the benefits of gap year should not be taken for granted' (p.160). Even though the gap year enhances the possibility of young people's employability and improves their soft skills among peers, considering the gap year shows that any advantages should not be granted in a specific context. She also asks how a gap year would assist a student in getting better at life. Her qualitative research has interviews with young people who have taken a gap year and also record their experiences on their blog page. However, there is little proof to support the view that young people taking a gap year perform better in higher education or employment in the future (Snee, 2010).

Another issue is student's knowledge about the gap year. Although some young people benefit from gap year activities and may dream about taking a gap year, some of them have no information about these programs. This is not exactly a disadvantage of gap year, however, this is a valuable point to research in deep. A study at a public university of Malaysia, Hamid, Shokory, & Awang (2019) has analyzed students' knowledge about the gap year program and their attitudes towards the program. According to the results, students' attitudes towards the program were optimistic despite it was seen that they had narrow information about the program. They conclude with the idea that if the time period of gap year is evaluated from students' outlook, this will make progress in a policy of

universities for applying supportive steps and guidance for young people to achieve their future goals (Hamid, Shokory, & Awang, 2019: p.828).

In Turkey, the university entrance exam which is a truly competitive race can be a source of severe stress if it is not successful in the first attempt. Adolescents who set their future significantly in these exams and naturally have major crises (Lüle, 2002). Ondag (2019) explained his clinical mentoring sessions of the gap year youth who have experiences of retaking the exam. Some examples have been given from the sessions;

- Firstly, he has mentioned that there is a candidate who could not get enough points in his first exam due to the fact that he lost his father in the process of retaking (p. 94).
- Secondly, a candidate, whose score is not enough for the medical school, but decides to retake the exam. Her father misinformed about the scores of his daughter to his colleagues. He claimed her to win the medical school. The father instructs his daughter to say to his colleagues that she has won the medical school. Then suddenly she started to cry because of embarrassment (pp. 97-98).
- Thirdly, there is a candidate who has taken the exam three times but has been prepared for the fourth time because he cannot enroll in a university. He was working as a waiter because of his weak financial condition, going to the private teaching institution, solving 500-600 questions per day and naturally due to excessive fatigue the bottom of his eyes was bruised and his hands were trembling. The candidate sleeps two or three hours a day and he believes that if he suffers, he will be more successful (pp. 113-114).
- Lastly, a candidate who wins the third entrance to the exam tells the story of failing the exam twice. In the first and second exams, he has to leave the exam early due to the extreme need for peeing. In the third exam, he makes himself a diaper by wearing a baggy pant, but he doesn't pee in the exam (pp. 146-147).

In Turkish context, the term is '*mezuna kalmak*' which is characterized as a transition year from high school to higher education in Turkey. The term is the same as gap year but most of the Turkish youth regard this process as '*mezuna kalmak'*. The chosen words for that definition 'mezun' means 'graduated' in English. The other word is 'kalmak' which means 'to stay'. When young people combine those two words, the

status of ‘mezuna kalmak’ has an adverse meaning. As a result, the term is negatively perceived as the time period that ‘still not entering university’ or ‘staying as a high school graduate’ in Turkey.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The research design, working group, data collection, data analysis, and ethical consideration are explained in this part.

Research Design

Although the number of studies on the gap year experience has increased, the meaning of the gap year phenomenon varies depending on the education systems of countries and society's perspective on education. In this context, there is any academic research on the meaning of the gap year phenomenon in Turkey. In order to explain this phenomenon, which has become increasingly popular during the transition to higher education, the experiences of the young people were analyzed by qualitative research methodology. Thus, young people who had a gap year experience in Turkey were interviewed and interpretations of the gap year takers were clarified in phenomenological design.

To determine the purposes of the qualitative research selected design, data collection steps, data analysis process, and reporting has been demonstrated respectively. Qualitative research enables to clarify community-related affairs. Thus, qualitative research illustrates how to comprehend societal problems by collecting experienced-based data from the field with an interdisciplinary approach. In qualitative research, researchers investigate the nature of the problems along with asking specific research questions to selected working group throughout the inquiry. Therefore, the working group interprets themselves personally in a particular context, time and space in order to obtain broad generalizations (Patton, 2002).

This study has been conducted through a phenomenological design which is one of the qualitative research designs in order to explain the meaning of the gap year. Phenomenology is a qualitative form of research in which the researcher is trying to determine common points in the understanding of various individuals regarding a specific phenomenon and collects data through in-depth interviews with participants (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Phenomenological approach seeks to explore the transformation

of lived experiences of human beings into consciousness level personally and emerged versions of the phenomenon in society. This methodology requires systematic effort by conducting in-depth interviews with people considering understanding of their perceptions, expressions, feelings, interests, senses, critics or judgements about related topics. Therefore, people interpret their experienced realities regarding phenomenon and phenomenologists combine those quotations by concentrating to generate a generalizable understanding (Patton, 2002).

Despite the fact that there is an approval that Edmund Husserl was the first user of the term phenomenology as a systematic and philosophical perspective, his student Alfred Schutz greatly developed the phenomenology and used it in sociological studies as a research design. Schutz figured out that the content of one's consciousness would be neither common nor completely unique, and concluded that each culture and subculture have its own knowledge (Flaherty, 2009). Thus, Schutz gathered his perspective under six items, which could be followed while conducting phenomenological studies: a specific tension of consciousness, a specific epoche, a prevalent form of spontaneity (namely working), a specific form of experiencing one's self, a specific form of sociality and a specific time-perspective (Schutz, 1962; p. 230).

Qualitative studies take a huge time and expense to comprehend the details of the human experiences and the background of the targeted phenomenon by collecting the data under the proper themes and sub-themes. While the researcher gives many efforts to conduct a qualitative study, some of the findings might be obscure for readers (Stake, 2010). However, phenomenology denies to utilize most of the descriptive terms that appear supposedly harmless. As a widespread methodology both in scientific literature and in daily language, phenomenology provides expository or interpretive schemes rather than clearly based on experience and expressing taken for granted truths. Therefore, the first and foremost purpose of phenomenology is to describe what is understood, and what is revived in consciousness without explanation, meaning, and importance in any way of the facts of life (Ferguson, 2003).

Therefore, the experiences of students who have taken a gap year in Turkey were revealed and it is understood that there are four main themes of study which are academic performance, taking a gap year decision, gap year activities, perceived gap year phenomenon in Turkey.

Participants

It has been difficult to reach young people who take a gap year since they are out of school and some of them prepare for the next university entrance exam at home, while others register for a private education center to prepare. Therefore, researcher announced the aims of the study on different platforms and reached the private education teachers who have contact with secondary school graduates in Ankara. High school graduates who have gap year experience represent a group of young people who struggle with family, social environment and state exam modifications mainly the transition from high school to higher education. The purposive sample group of the study is the young people who take a gap year in Turkey. Since all participants have gap year experience homogenous sampling has been used at the beginning of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012). After that the researcher interviewed with the initial cohort of the participants, snowball sampling method was used to reach the further population. The snowball sampling is when the necessity of a sample rises in conducting the study, the researcher asks for a recommendation to interview the person whether about knowing new members who are experienced regarding research topics (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

The study revealed how young people interpret the gap year in their social world. Throughout the research, 24 young people were interviewed as it is shown in Table 3. The working group consisted of young people residing in various cities in Turkey. The criteria are;

1. People who entered the university exam in 2019 but decided to retake the university exam for next year without enrolling any university,

2. People who have stopped formal education for a year or more,

3. People who entered the university entrance exam again in 2020 and have settled in university or have a gap year again.

Table 3

Demographics of the participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Graduation Year	Type of High School	Branch	Academic Track for Examination	City
P1	M	19	2019	Anatolian	Science	Science	Ankara
P2	M	20	2019	Anatolian	Science	Science	Ankara
P3	M	20	2019	Anatolian	Science	Science	Ankara
P4	M	19	2019	Anatolian	Science	Science	Ankara
P5	M	19	2019	Anatolian	Science	Science	Gaziantep
P6	M	20	2019	Anatolian	Science	Science	Ankara
P7	M	21	2019	Anatolian	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Diyarbakır
P8	M	19	2019	Anatolian	Turkish-Math	Turkish-Math	Giresun
P9	M	19	2019	Anatolian	Science	Science	Yalova
P10	M	21	2018	Anatolian	Science	Science	Ankara
P11	M	19	2019	Science	Science	Science	Giresun
P12	M	19	2019	Science	Science	Science	Giresun
P13	F	19	2019	Anatolian	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Ankara
P14	F	19	2019	Open Education High School	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Ankara
P15	F	19	2019	Anatolian	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Ankara
P16	F	19	2019	Anatolian	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Ankara
P17	F	20	2018	Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School	Turkish-Math	Turkish-Math	İstanbul
P18	F	20	2018	Private High School	Turkish-Math	Turkish-Math	İstanbul
P19	F	19	2019	Anatolian	Science	Turkish-Math	Konya
P20	F	19	2019	Anatolian	Science	Turkish-Math	Ankara
P21	F	19	2019	Anatolian	Turkish-Math	Social Sciences	İstanbul
P22	F	19	2019	Anatolian Imam Preacher High School	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Siirt
P23	F	19	2019	Anatolian	Foreign Language	Foreign Language	Ankara
P24	F	19	2019	Private High School	Foreign Language	Turkish-Math	Ankara

Table 4

Family demographics of the participants

Participants	Father's job	Father's degree	Mother's job	Mother's degree	Siblings	Student Siblings
P1	Police	Associate degree	Homemaker	Bachelor	1	1
P2	Retired	Lower Sec. School	Homemaker	Primary school	3	0
P3	Technician	Secondary school	Homemaker	Primary school	1	1
P4	Soccer Coach	Bachelor	Homemaker	Primary school	1	1
P5	Construction worker	Primary school	Cook	Primary school	5	5
P6	Officer	Secondary school	Housewife	Primary school	1	0
P7	Construction worker	No degree	Housewife	No degree	4	0
P8	Technician	Bachelor	Nurse	Bachelor	1	0
P9	Retired	Secondary school	Teacher	Bachelor	0	0
P10	Retired	Primary school	Homemaker	Primary school	1	0
P11	Businessman	Master’s degree	Homemaker	Bachelor	1	1
P12	Retired - Farmer	Secondary school	Homemaker	Primary school	5	1
P13	Businessman	Lower Sec. School	Homemaker	Secondary school	2	2
P14	Retired	Secondary school	Homemaker	Secondary school	1	0
P15	Building contractor	Primary school	Homemaker	Primary school	2	1
P16	Construction worker	Primary school	Homemaker	Primary school	3	2
P17	Retired	Primary school	Homemaker	Secondary school	2	0
P18	Chemist	Lower Sec. School	Homemaker	Lower Sec. School	1	0
P19	Accountant	Secondary school	Businesswoman	Lower Sec. School	1	1
P20	Estate Agent	Bachelor	Homemaker	Secondary school	1	1
P21	Tailor	Primary school	Homemaker	Primary school	1	1
P22	Businessman	Secondary school	Homemaker	No degree	1	1
P23	Teacher	Bachelor	(Dead)	No degree	5	1
P24	Businessman	Primary school	Homemaker	Primary school	2	0

Data Collection

In the data collection phase, the research needs to be conducted with suitable strategies to provide expressiveness and cost-effective steps for researchers in alignment with research questions (Stake, 2010). In the study, a demographic information form and a semi-structured interview form which comprises open-ended questions are used as data collection tools. The demographic information form aimed to collect participants' information under the items of gender, age, type of graduated high school, branch, study area, school success, graduation year, city, father's job, father's degree, mother's job, mother's degree, number of siblings, student sibling(s) (see Appendix 1 for the demographic information form and Appendix 2 for the demographic information form in Turkish). After the demographic information was collected, the interview process was started for each participant by utilizing a semi-structured interview form (see Appendix 3 for the final interview form and Appendix 4 for the final interview form in Turkish).

Semi-structured form of the study was designed with the contribution of both researcher and thesis supervisor after the literature review had been done about gap year experiences of youth at international level. Gap year experiences depend on the education system of the countries and the phenomenon is differentiated based on the lived experiences of youth. To understand gap year experiences of young people, various studies had been examined in different country contexts due to the lack of scientific study on gap year experiences of Turkish youth in the literature. Consequently, the influential studies about gap year experiences of youth (Jones, 2004; Heath, 2007; Frisancho et.al., 2016) were investigated to design semi-structured interview form by applying phenomenological approach (Stake, 2010). In addition, one of the previous studies of the researcher which is conducted in videographic study (Belk & Kozinets, 2005) might be counted as piloting research of this thesis. The researcher investigated the youth who have shared their gap year experiences on YouTube online video sharing platform (Aksu, 2020). The themes and categories of the study titled 'misconceived gap year transition of higher education: a video-graphic study on high school graduates in Turkey' also contributed to generate the interview form of the study.

The main intention to make interviews with a working group is gathering unprecedented data from people by both amassing numeric information from them and exploring the points that are impossible to observe by the researcher by oneself. From this perspective, the researcher asks their questions of the working group at a conversational

level to deepen the experiences of interviewees by purifying the interpretations of them (Stake, 2010). Thus, the interview is one of the most suitable data collection techniques for phenomenological research which is conducted within the scope of examining the experiences of the candidates who decided to prepare for the university exam again. The data has been collected by video and voice recordings of in-depth interviews and taking the field notes. In order to interview young people, an online meeting has been held with each of them. The interviews have been held via online meeting platforms which are known as internet-based communication tools. Zoom and WhatsApp applications are used during the interviews. In addition, voice and video recordings have been taken according to the consent of each participant. In case of arising a problem based on internet, application or communication device during the meeting, the interviews were clearly completed by changing to alternative platforms that were previously determined. Each interview was conducted with one researcher and one participant. One interview proceeded approximately 30-40 minutes.

To comprehend the research problem in-depth, researchers often appeal to conduct studies with semi-structured interviews (Fraenkel et al., 2012). After determining the main research questions, a semi-structured interview form is designed according to the intention of conducting applied study. The researcher should make a literature review and take into consideration all potential information regarding more particular questions. Harrell and Bradley (2009) explain 3 main question types of a semi-structured interview are descriptive, structural and contrast questions. Descriptive questions provide a clearer understanding of the interviewee's experiences by asking for issues that the researcher would not think about before. To describe experienced-based situations draw a bright picture compatible with the main research questions. Besides, structural questions deepen the meaning of a phenomenon that is experienced by the interviewee in doing so building a relationship between things or circumstances and making categorization to clarify what the researcher seeks for. Finally, contrast questions improve the quality of answers by differentiating the information that the researcher has already collected (Harrell & Bradley, 2009).

In this research, various types of questions are used by referring to related literature as it is seen on question form in Appendix 1. Also, the questions are prepared to take into account the cultural context and social structure of gap year youth by the researcher. While asking questions, it revealed the explanations of their activities, actions,

perspectives, feelings, excitements, daily life expressions used by the participants in the process of preparing for the exam and relations with the environment.

Data Analysis

Interpreting the data in a qualitative study primarily involves analyzing the information obtained by the researcher from multiple sources such as observations, interviews or field notes to create a consistent explanation of the experiences of the sample group. Data analysis starts along with the data collection and pursues throughout the qualitative study by making both analysis and synthesis. In qualitative studies, content analysis is one of the most practical analysis methods for interview data, especially in educational studies. Researchers naturally encounter overt and covert content while they are conducting the interviews. It is huge work to comprehend the precise information and decipher by detecting obvious or hidden clarification in the ethical perspective of the study. Hence, content analysis specifies systematically to conduct the analysis of the research data (Fraenkel et al., 2012). To make a rational formulation of categories and themes, expressions of young people are analyzed by using content analysis in this study.

After the first interview was finished, it was ready to extract the interpretations to generate a unique comprehension in the light of research questions. To do this, the first step is the coding of interpreted data to gather those codes in categories. Coding helps to collect necessary knowledge in categories by indicating a much more succinct and understandable format of the data (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Codes are helpful to formulate the categories in the condition that there are no predetermined categories of the study. Thus, these brief explanations have great help to create categories to organize the outcomes of the participants' interpretation in this study. If formulated categories are presented by showing frequencies, it improves the understanding of the codified data from a smoother perspective. To describe accurate findings of the research, well-designed categories and themes enhance the understandability of the study (Fraenkel et. al., 2012).

In this research, after the semi-structured interviews were done, the collected data was transcribed and coded at the end of the interviews. Interviews were recorded and conducted in Turkish which indicated the original version in Appendix 2 and then were translated into English for the research. Interpretations of 24 participants were transcribed, coded and finally gathered under the categories and themes through using content analysis. Categories are numbered according to the frequency of the participants'

coded interpretations. Themes and categories have been explained by giving distinct quotations from the research data and clarified to rationalize the findings of the research in a discernible way.

Ethical Considerations

This thesis was conducted with the permission of the Ethics Committee of Ankara University. Completing demographic information form and semi-structure interview form, they were submitted to the Ethics Committee in Ankara University to check ethical violations of the study. After getting the approval of the committee, abovementioned forms were used as data collection tools and the interviews started at the beginning of spring semester of 2020-2021.

Taking part in this study was entirely with the consent of the participant. It was stated to the participants that they have the right to refuse to participate in the research at any time or to quit after starting. Since the results of this study are used for scientific purposes, all the statements obtained from the participants were used within the scope of the research. No fees were paid or requested from the participants for the interview. In this context, without being under any pressure or coercion participants have accepted the usage of their personal information for scientific purposes complied with their own free will and volunteering. Their interpretations have been used on the condition that the confidentiality rules obtained within the scope of the research.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part focuses on the findings of the research. It has been found that there are four main themes and eleven categories of the research. When the participants' interpretations were analyzed, they have different levels of success based on the types of high school that they graduated from. Academic background is a critical factor to determine future education preferences of youth due to circumstances beyond their control. In this respect, the first theme defined the academic performance of the participants. The other three themes have great importance in order to answer the research questions respectively. The second theme explained the process of taking a gap year decision of participants. They clarified their future career goals by giving examples of gap year's impact. Also they compared their experiences in the last year of high school and after the gap year is over. The participants expressed their level of satisfaction under the condition of the reactions that they received from the environment. Therefore, the second theme answered the first research question "how is the decision of a gap year made before attending higher education?".

The third theme clarified types of gap year activities. Participants described their gap year activities by comparing the activities that they have during their school time. During the gap year they had to cover the expenses of the activities as well. Gap year activities influenced their daily life habits as the future goals of the participants changed. Finally, the advantages and disadvantages of the gap year were justified through the lens of participants. The third theme answered the second research question: what are the experiences of young people during the gap year? Lastly, the fourth theme illustrated the perceived gap year phenomenon in Turkey. The participants emphasized on the needed support and who could support them during the gap year. Although participants have desired activities of the gap year, they could not fulfill some of them. Also, they expressed the impacts of COVID-19 on their gap year since the pandemic occurred during their gap year. Consequently, the fourth theme answered the third research question "how does the meaning of gap year reveal according to high school graduates?".

Table 5

Themes, Categories and Codes of the Study

Themes	Categories	Codes	Participants
Academic Performance		Successful at School (14)	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P16, P18, P23
		Ordinary Student (5)	P8, P15, P17, P20, P22
		Insufficient Effort for Education (5)	P3, P12, P19, P21, P24
Taking a Gap Year Decision		Having not Sufficient Exam Score (21)	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19, P20, P22, P23, P24
		Being Under the Threshold score (3)	P3, P17, P21
	Future goals during the gap year	Enrolling Elite Universities (2)	P11, P13
		Following Dreams-Passion (8)	P5, P7, P10, P14, P15, P16, P17, P20
		Getting ensured job (12)	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P9, P12, P18, P19, P21, P23, P24
		No aim – roll the dice (2)	P8, P22
	Differences of exam results after the gap year is over	Getting higher point of the university entrance exam (18)	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P20, P21, P22, P24
		No big difference (6)	P3, P8, P11, P13, P19, P23
	Satisfaction of Taking a gap year	Fortunately (20)	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P23, P24
		Unfortunately (4)	P12, P20, P21, P22
	Reactions to decision of taking a gap year	Confirmation of Gap Year-Support from Environment (13)	P1, P3, P4, P5, P8, P11, P13, P16, P17, P19 P2, P10, P12
		Overt way (10) / Covert way (3)	
		Critics From Environment (11)	P6, P7, P9, P14, P15, P18, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24
Gap Year Activities		Going to Private education center (23)	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24
		Individual Study with educational sets (1)	P8
		Working (2)	P1, P7

	Gap year without going to school	Better for focusing on your goals (13)	P1, P2, P3, P4, P9, P10, P11, P12, P15, P18, P19, P22, P24
		No difference (4)	P6, P13, P20, P23,
		Feeling lost (7)	P5, P7, P8, P14, P16, P17, P21
	Expenses of gap year	Private education center (14)	P1, P3, P7, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18, P19, P20
		Test book, photocopy and stationary (19)	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P23, P24
		Public transportation (10)	P4, P5, P7, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P17, P21
		Food and drinks (9)	P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P9, P10, P14, P21
		No expense (2)	P6, P22
	Change of Habits	Quitting from social media and computer (3)	P7, P9
		Adapting a new study plan (22)	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23, 24
		Change of daily routines (7)	P3, P5, P10, P12, P18, P21, P22
		Limitation of social life (9)	P2, P3, P4, P7, P9, P10, P14, P21, P23
		Gaining more stress (6)	P2, P13, P15, P20, P21, P22
	Advantages	Being more experienced (11)	P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P13, P14, P21, P22, P23, P24
		Keeping more time to focus on your goals (9)	P1, P2, P3, P8, P10, P11, P12, P15, P17, P18, P19, P20
		Establishing supportive environment (1)	P14
	Disadvantages	To lost a year (9)	P1, P4, P6, P9, P13, P17, P18, P22, P24
		Getting financial pressure (5)	P1, P7, P10, P13, P14
		Facing unexpected situations (2)	P1, P13
		Fear of failure-Risk (5)	P1, P3, P6, P14, P20
		Academic Precariousness (5)	P1, P5, P13, P15, P19
		Be exposed to social pressure (7)	P2, P10, P11, P12, P14, P18, P22
		Facing emotional breakdowns – stress (10)	P3, P7, P9, P13, P14, P16, P18, P21, P22, P23
		Taking more responsibility (4)	P8, P11, P12, P21
		Having no social status (2)	P10, P17
The Gap Year Phenomenon in Turkey	Expected Support During The Gap Year	Academic Support and Career Guidance(12)	P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P9, P12, P14, P15, P17, P18, P19
		Psychological Support and Socialization (3)	P11, P13, P22
		Support from Environment (8)	P1, P5, P7, P16, P20, P21, P23, P24
		Governmental Support (1)	P10

Desired but Unfulfilled Activities of Gap Year	Travelling (local – abroad) (15)	P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19, P20, P22, P23
	Internship (2)	P15, P17
	Language learning (12)	P2, P5, P9, P10, P11, P15, P16, P17, P19, P20, P23, P24
	Personal development - hobbies (11)	P4, P5, P6, P9, P10, P12, P14, P16, P21, P22, P24
	Academic preparation for university (5)	P2, P3, P8, P18, P19
	Socialization activities (10)	P1, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18, P23, P24
	Working (2)	P7, P11
Impacts of COVID-19 on Gap Year	Disorder of studying at home – Poor mental health and socialization problems (15)	P1, P2, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12, P15, P17, P18, P19, P21, P22, P23, P24
	Challenging with online learning (7)	P6, P13, P14, P15, P18, P20, P23
	Turning the crisis into an opportunity (6)	P3, P4, P5, P10, P16, P17
	Anxiety of getting COVID-19 (2)	P13, P16
	Changed conditions of university entrance exam (2)	P13, P20

Academic Performance

School exams are one of the most important criteria for measuring success in Turkey. As a result of these exams, students obtain a grade point average (GPA) at the end of each academic term. In Turkey, exams are administered at school and after primary school students take the exam of the transition from primary education to secondary education (TEOG). Following high school, they sit a university entrance exam (YKS) which is the examination of transition from secondary education to higher education. The national examinations are indispensable for everyone in the Turkish education system. Furthermore, after graduation from university, there are many other national examinations related to being placed in governmental institutions (KPSS) or assessing language qualification (YDS, YOKDIL) and etc. All examinations are carried out by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) and Council of Higher Education (YOK) at the national level. Specifically, after graduating from high school millions of Turkish young people go through an intensive preparation process which starts from primary school in order to be successful in university entrance exam (Yamanoğlu, 2009). At that point, the examinations have great importance in shaping career choices and future employment of Turkish youth (Erol et. al., 2015).

In the literature, the exam scores determine the level of success (Aypay & Sever, 2015) or the score of university entrance exam (Baş & Kıvılcım, 2019) by being exposed to social comparison among peers, as well (Barlas et. al., 2010). These situations represent exam-oriented mentality in Turkey (Çınar, 2006; Kutlu & Kumandas, 2012). According to this direction, students enroll at different types of high schools for their secondary education. Thus, the participants have different types of school, branch and academic track as indicated in Table 3. As a result of the participants' academic performance, they defined themselves as successful, ordinary (neither successful nor reluctant) and lazy students. When the interpretations of participants are evaluated, the majority of the participants have excellent grades in their primary and secondary education. Many candidates are not able to get the expected result from the university entrance exam due to various personal reasons or unexpected circumstances even though they did well in school exams. In this regard, they decided to have a gap year. Besides, some participants named themselves as an ordinary student. These students are not successful at school as they do not have low GPAs either. Nevertheless, they could not achieve good scores in university entrance exam. In this case, some participants stated that high schools are not

qualified to prepare students for the university entrance exam. For example, participants who are from vocational and technical Anatolian high school (VTAHS) or foreign language major have different experiences regarding preparation process of university entrance exam. They have a lack of academic knowledge as high schools have less efficiency. Furthermore, their preparations for university entrance exam during the senior year of high school were not enough to get a reasonable score on the exam. Participant 17 who is a graduate of a vocational high school expressed that the curriculum contents are not compatible with the content of university entrance exam.

> P17: 80% of the students in my high school took a gap year. You learn a lot about your field in VTAHS, but they do not provide us with skills and knowledge for the university entrance exam. If they did, most of the students would go to university without a gap year. It is inevitable to take the university entrance exam. If you want, you can get a job and work somewhere. But it is not for me. I believe that my branch is not suitable for me. Nowadays, studying at any university is ridiculous. That's why I continued like this.

Participant 16 who has opted for the field of foreign language stated that school staff gives less importance to foreign language classes than other classes of high schools.

> P16: …My school was not very good at this (preparation for the exam). Just a language class. It was like a forgotten class. My (national) language exam result was not very good either. It was not very satisfying.

Participants made some inferences which are significant factors in taking a gap year decision. The educational background of young people is one of the most important factors. As seen in Table 3, the participants who graduated from different majors of different high schools claimed that education they receive at school and school curriculum are not exam based and they need one year more of preparation for the university entrance exam. Additional case for the VTAHS is the internship period that is obligatory for the VTAHS students in order to practice what has been taught at school. Thus, the intensive period of internship prevents students' studying performance for the university entrance exam during the last year of high school. This indicates that the students made a gap year decision to prepare for the exam again. In fact, when Kaya (2015) analyzed the future expectations of VTAHS graduate students, he concluded that the number of teachers in VTAHS are insufficient. As VTAHS teachers are not experts in their fields, some students do not have sufficient academic background to get a good score on the university entrance exam. By means of the opportunity of passing to the job market without an exam, VTAHS

students trust this at the beginning of the high school years. Therefore, they do not show necessary performance on subjects to build an academic background. Besides, the statements of the participants confirmed the inefficiency of VTAHS education in preparing for the university entrance exam. A study on the relationship between failure on university entrance exam and supernatural attributions explained that the VTAHS students are the most failed ones in the university entrance exam (Behti, 2015).

Finally, a number of students called themselves as reluctant students. They are not interested in school and therefore their failure in the university entrance exam is probable. However, they are well-aware of the reasons why their scores are low. Participant 3 who defines himself as a reluctant student explained that the reason for not being able to get high points in the exam was related with the lack of education discipline at high school. Thus, he highlighted that last year of high school did not provide enough time for preparation of university entrance exam due to his lack of academic background. He took a year gap twice for to build his academic knowledge to be successful at the university entrance exam.

> P3: Most of the students wasted their time in high school. (They are) lazy students! High school time was spent in vain. It (preparation for the exam) came to mind after graduating from high school. 4 years (academic content) cannot be covered in 1 year. That's why they (high school graduates) realized that they need to take a gap year.

In this context, some of the participants stated that they passed the secondary education process unconsciously and did not study for both school examinations and the university entrance exam. It has been observed that the students consider it as a privilege to take a gap year by taking the unlimited chance of entering the state exam with the idea that one year is not time consuming.

On the other hand, although the participants already graduated from high school, some participants stated that they chose their type of high school under the influence of family members and school teachers. Therefore, these participants were extremely dissatisfied with this situation as their interests were overlooked in this process. Participant 14 who has completed her high school education in the field of language expressed the effect of her family on educational preferences as follows;

> P14: ... My family had a high expectation of me. So they said that your future should be guaranteed. They sent me to VTAHS (heath sciences field) as a small punishment... Actually I had decided to choose the language department during

> primary school. In primary school, I said I would never go to VTAHS, but my family sent me unfortunately. But after that, luckily I switched my school to Anatolian high school and chose the language department.

It is significant to say that parents have a great impact on the educational preferences of participants. This statement highlighted that the environment has a strong impact on the young people's future educational and career preferences. In the next part, further individual and societal factors that have significant impact on the participants' decisions to take a gap year have been examined.

Taking a Gap Year Decision

The participants took the gap year decision under some circumstances. First of all, setting a goal is the most certain criteria before starting a gap year. According to this goal, they approved that the gap year enables them a fresh start to begin the useful activities compared to the last year. Furthermore, participants could not design their gap year process by themselves. Their families and social environment have a huge role in setting the goals of gap year. Thus, the reactions that they received from their environment have been elaborated under this theme, as well. According to the participants, the most powerful factor of deciding a gap year was the failure to get a desired score in the university entrance exam or staying under the threshold score in the exam. While the majority of participants stated that they decided to take a gap year because they did not achieve high points in the exam. A few participants also highlighted that they did not pass the threshold score in the exam. The truth for the first group is that they passed the threshold score for a university but they declared that they are not satisfied with their results and they thought they did not deserve these results. For the second group, it is inevitable to take a gap year and prepare for the university entrance exam again since they have already failed the exam. Either in two conditions participants explained the gap year decision as a re-preparation of the university entrance exam. However, participants noted the reasons for their failure by indicating their lack of management on duration and stress during the exam. Also, they blamed the sophisticated structure of the university entrance exam and the demotivated effect of the stressful ambiance of the exam center. Moreover, there is a facilitator factor for the students to manage with those troubles. Unlimited chance of entering the university entrance exam allows candidates who are not satisfied with the exam results to retake the exam in the next year. Thus, students choose the path

of preparing for the exam again and easily retake the examination the next year. Participant 17, who stated that she could not pay enough attention to her goals in her first gap year due to health problems of her father, needed the process of preparing for the exam again and taking the second gap year.

> P17: ...I graduated in 2018. At that time, I was doing traineeship and was continuing to high school, as well. Because of this, I did not have time to study for the exam. That's why I said let's just take the exam without expectation. I took the exam with 2 hours of sleep or something. After that, I took in and out and nothing happened. Anyway I wasn't expecting anything. Then it was the next year. I said let's study this time, let's take the exam again. Then I went to the private education center. I think I could not get enough support from this center in terms of education and in different aspects. Also, my father had a health problem. Cardiac patient. We were in the hospital for 2-3 months. There have been such cases. That's why it (getting enough score) did not happen again. You know, I said, I will take it (gap year) for the 3rd time, now it should be. Let me work hard and take the exam. Actually, you are getting stressed, as well. Everything is overlapping. Then I went to the private course. This time I said, no way! I will not compromise. Whatever came out, I wanted to pass the exam. Then finally, I won the dialysis department. It was the major that I wanted. Also, since I studied at a VTAHS, I did not take the training for the state exam.

Besides their exam results, young people evaluate the situations of their current life before taking a gap year decision. At first, participants question themselves before the gap year. They criticized their plans during the gap year and gave a couple of suggestions for those who are in the position of taking a gap year decision. Their main comments about necessary things to do before taking a gap year decision are being self-critical, defining accurate aims for the future, being ready for unexpected situations and having external support. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of university entrance exam results to achieve their goals. They supported the gap year decision with the intention of retaking the exam again.

> P20: If they really have a specific goal, I mean, if they have very high goals, and really missed it in the exam or they have made a bad score but thy are somehow self-confident, you know, if they say I will improve my results at least a half or that score is not enough for me…. Whoever thinks they will be unhappy with their future profession, I think they should take a gap year.

In addition to individual reflections of participants, they referred to typologies about the young people who take a gap year in Turkey. When participants think in a broad

perspective through the in-depth questions of the study, a number of typologies are explained by Participant 1.

> P1: …There are three types of students (gap year takers). First, those who do not reach the necessary score for the desired department. Second, those who are exposed to family pressure. Third, those who do not want to make random choices. I mean, of course, it is possible to register for a university with a low score. Up to 500,000 rankings, it could be. But people prefer the gap year instead of going to college in vain. Because finding a job is very tough. People really want to go to a department where they can obtain a really good job. That's the reason why they take a gap year. Exactly. I took a gap year because I could not reach the sufficient score of the department that I would like to register for.

Lüle (2002) examined the relationship between the autonomy and anxiety levels of adolescents who had graduated from high school and were preparing for university. In the study, any factors such as anxiety, autonomy, self-perceptions or psychological symptoms of the candidates were discussed within the framework of social reasons. According to his results of the study, the decision of preparing for the exam again is an indication of students' efforts to develop themselves, to acquire a profession, and to direct their future in the career they want. In this regard, the quotation of Participant 1 is consistent to demonstrate one of the reasons for taking a gap year decision. Thereafter, the participants have elicited why young people have decided to take a gap year. Young people prepare for the exam again during the gap year to attain a profession with a better income in the future by the intention of enrolling in an elite university.

> P18: The most effective factor in determining the goals is certainly job anxiety. I think there are two kinds of people going to university. One completely achieved its goal. The other one is the person who could not reach his goal and had to make a choice. This person also supposes he/she's going to a department that provides a bright future. Everyone says something, we watch it even in the news, here's what are valuable jobs in this year? People say, let's say law. Medicine is not as popular as it used to be, so on and so forth... Actually, job anxiety entirely results from financial concerns in Turkey. What should be my future profession? How can I cope with my expenses? Should I work with the minimum wage? Or should it be better? This is exactly how people think about themselves.

> P14: 50,000 rankings are bad. If my friend chose those universities, she would be unemployed. One way or another, she had to prepare again. The cities of the universities that she won had a very low profile and if she enrolled in there, her employability chance would be very low.

Similarly, Participant 7 stated that he could not see any alternative other than preparing for the exam by deciding a gap year. He stated that if he does not continue his

education after graduating from high school, he must earn a living by working. Moreover, he implied the difficulties that the employee position without a bachelor's degree put him in low positions on the job market.

> P7: …As I said, I worked for 3 months after the exam. When you work, normally there are superiors people other than your position and he orders you there. Of course, people can feel humiliated. Then, you don't even get much income when you work. There is no concrete side of it. So, you understand that the only option is to continue higher education and that's why you put yourself in studying.

Credentials are an important function in having quality education and finding a job in Turkey. Çınar's (2006) study on the effects of the university exam on students shows that the main reason for the importance given to higher education is that people have more opportunities to find a job after graduating from university than those who have a high school degree. Although people have a bachelor's degree, the possibility of remaining unemployed is a reality even after graduating from university. This situation shows that the youth unemployment crisis is a major problem in Turkey. Besides, society has certain tangible expectations from students. Such as, families wish for their children to gain a good bachelor's degree, get a profitable job and earn a decent living conditions in Turkey. In this direction, the participants affirmed to take a gap year while studying hard to get a better opportunity for higher education. Therefore, the gap year experience is principally conceptualized as an instrumental term and the knowledge and credentials that are collected during the gap year provides the opportunity to enter the graduate job market for a better position (Heath 2007).

Before delving into the categories of Taking a Gap Year Decision Theme, Participant 11 summarized his process of taking a gap year decision by evaluating the position of young people who are at transition to university. He emphasized that there are some valuable jobs and young people try to get those positions by entering elite universities and they refrain from studying at low-profile universities. He noted that since getting a bachelor's degree has not guaranteed the people's employability (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020), this is a misconception of young people regarding transition to university in Turkey.

> P11: As far as I see, there are certain professions and occupational groups in society. The student wants to have these groups or professions. Well… Nobody wants to be a good teacher. Because the teaching profession is blocked or they don't want to register a university in a small city. Because metropolitan cities offer

much more opportunities to the students. This is a huge factor. I had 3 criteria. City, university and department. I want a metropolitan city, a high ranking university with good lecturers, and a profession that appeals to my goals and dreams. Most students did the first two criteria. But as far as I have observed, nobody pays attention to the third one. I think this is the most important thing. Instead of choosing a profession that is suitable for their passion, they prefer professions that can earn good money, have prestige and be valid in Turkey and in the world. Of course, this is a logical choice for them. But nobody wants to head towards art, culture, sports or any other majors. We are looking at a blind spot. Medicine is at the forefront. (People say) I have to earn medicine. If they have an idea of being a good engineer, they just continue to study with the intention of enrolling in the engineering department at Bogazici University or Middle East Technical University (METU). They live by studying with a focus on physics, chemistry, biology subjects by desiring that I should gain these universities without ever looking at themselves, which I think is wrong. I don't know how long it (this mentality) will continue like this.

Future Goals During the Gap Year

Young people have a gap year to realize their future goals. Although the participants have different goals for the future, the gap year covers an academically given decision within the purpose of preparing for the exam again. When the future goals of gap year decisions are examined, the majority of the participants aim to enroll in a university department which has a strong potential for employability after graduation. In this category, participants clarified that although they aim to get a higher score in the exam, they have made choices by considering the departments where they can easily find a job, especially in health, law and other prestigious jobs. Participant 24 has explained her complex and unsteady journey concerning her transition to higher education. She evaluated the correlations between the graduate market and job opportunities by giving examples of her environment. She explained her intention to have a job that enables her to improve her skills constantly and cover her all expenses by herself.

P24: I think about the history department. But I did not so much. Because there is no position for this job. It doesn't make sense for me to have a job which I can't make money after becoming a (history) teacher. My sister is a math teacher who is waiting to be appointed in a governmental school. Frankly, I do not want to enter KPSS (an exam for assigning governmental bodies). I couldn't afford to take an exam again. Actually, I love psychology. But students prefer psychology so much and there are many unemployed psychologists out there. It didn't make sense, either. Then gastronomy took my attention. Because when you study gastronomy, you can learn different languages and the opportunities of going abroad are very high. It is in the tourism faculty, as well. There are also wide

> business areas in gastronomy. You can start your restaurant. Moreover, I guess you can also work in governmental institutions. I haven't searched for it so much. You can work as a Gastronomy teacher in VTAHS as well. There are also such possibilities. That's why it is very attractive. My parents still don't like my idea. They are against me. Also, during the preference period, my sister said that you can consider the 2-years programs (associate degree). Think about screening, audiometry (2 years' medical programs). Look at the majors like these, she said. But what will happen after graduation? All you can do is go to the hospital and work. Do you have the opportunity to improve yourself? No. I don't want to do that. I have been looking for a profession that enables me to stand on my own feet since I have already stayed with my family all my life.

According to Çınar' s (2006) study regarding the impact of university entrance exam on young people, 173 out of 250 candidates stated that they would be prepared again if they failed the exam. Because the candidates are aware of the importance of the university to find a job in Turkey. They are aware that if they stay as high school graduates, they will not be qualified and they will not find a suitable job. Apart from preparing for the exam again, 48 candidates said they would look for a job, 7 candidates would get married, 2 candidates would go to the army. As it is seen from the quotations of Participant 24, she explained her journey to take that gap year decision in a challenging way for the sake of getting a better future occupation. Furthermore, participants affirmed that they took a gap year to enroll in a university that provides an opportunity to achieve their dream jobs. Some participants stated that the gap year period is a good occasion to increase the score for the high ranking universities in Turkey.

> P13: Let me go to a well-known university, go to a metropolitan city. I always wanted it that way. Then of course, my aims started changing to enroll in an elite university by the contributions of my environment's comments at the private education center. For example, when I was at the private education center, people say I am studying at Hacettepe University or I am at Bilkent University…With the contributions of these examples, my goals started to get higher and higher. So, I took a gap year to make it better. My goals are shifted to more elite universities.

Frisancho et.al., (2016) found that the learning achievements of the candidates who took the university entrance exam for the second time alternated around 5% as compared to the starting point. Even more, candidates who took the exam with less poor socio-economic status earned greater profits. Young people are from public schools and lower income families have more learning outcomes than more trained students at best schools or students from higher income families. Therefore, the gap year is a process in which young people with poor socio-economic status catch the ones who have a high

cultural capital. Heath's (2007) statement confirms that while gap year provides an important opportunity for young people that they may gain new skills, they struggle with the increasing marathon mentality that is derived by the exams during the transition to higher education. This expression fits with the participants' interpretations of the future goals during the gap year category. Finally, a few participants noted that they took a gap year to try their chance again with the intention of getting a better score from the university entrance exam without any future goals. These participants evaluate the gap year with no purpose except that studying exam content.

Satisfaction Level of Gap year Decision

The explanations of participants were elaborated about whether their expectations are realized after completing the gap year process. Also, the satisfaction level of participants has been unearthed under this category. Majority of the participants stated that they are happy to take a gap year decision. They expressed that the gap year has both advantages and disadvantages, but they are satisfied with taking a year out when the gap year is over. On the other hand, a few participants stated that the disadvantages of the gap year are more than its advantages. The reason for making such comments is that their gap year decision did not make a positive difference regarding their goals. Participant 3, who has decided to take one more gap year, noted that he did not want to make meaningless choices for higher education. He wanted to increase his exam score by taking a gap year, and he approved that this is not a waste of time. He indicated that he was satisfied with the decision of the first and the second gap year. Participant 3 stated that he gained the studying discipline at this time.

> P3: My (gap year) decision is logical. Because I could not score enough for engineering departments or something like my friends. If I register for less preferred departments or 2 years-program; what will I do if the section closes due to less number of registered students? or how can I obtain a job after graduating from a 2 years-program?

Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003) emphasized the importance of understanding cultural capital in the field of education in their research on employability in a knowledge driven economy. Brown et al. (2003) argued that the conclusion of the many studies on increasing the students' ability to be successful in education or employment depending on young people has the same cultural capital with their teachers

or future employers. They argued that employers reject candidates for ineligibility which means it is a rejection for lacking cultural capital. Therefore, the main issue is that those with similar cultural backgrounds manage their employability in a more logical and structured way. Participant 3 emphasized that he has taken the gap year decision twice indicating that to get the professions and universities which he wants to take place in the future. He has accepted his gap year experience will build an academic background for him. The statements of him are consistent with that gap year is a time period spent for gaining cultural capital. Apart from that, one of the female participants emphasized that young girls, who did not take steps to higher education, have been pressured to marry by their environment, especially girls who live in the south eastern region of Turkey. Asserting that Participant 23 decided to take a gap year by preparing for the exam again in order not to drop out from education. So she expressed her satisfaction to take a gap year.

> P23: I support girls to continue their education. After all, if you haven't continued education, you're getting married and so on. Those processes are more stressful. After studying hard for the exam, at least two years, I knew that a better life would be presented to me. So, I decided to take a gap year.

According to a study of International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) which was conducted by Malhotra, Warner, McGonagle and Lee-Rife (2011), there are some intervention programs to prevent early marriage of girls. However, they determined that girls' education was the most powerful intervention method in preventing early marriage of young girls. The fact that being at school or in education helps them to be seen as still children or young, therefore, they continue their personal development processes. Thus, they have no status to be married. At the same time, education enables girls to increase their knowledge and skills to develop their social networks, to make the best decisions for their own interests in life. Moreover, women apparently provide benefits to their families and society economically. They might only earn reasonable income by the help of high quality and advanced education (Malhotra et. al., (2011). Although the girls seem to be involved in education as boys, the environment of girl participants offers marriage as an alternative if they do not continue their education. Consequently, the participants who felt this perception decided to continue their education by convincing their families to prepare for the exam again and take a gap year instead of marriage.

While Participant 12 designed a meaningful gap year for him, he explained his false steps during the year. In his gap year period, he gained some habits such as eat healthy, gaining sport routine and personal time management. Even though second exam score was lower, he has invested the time on himself to gain some soft skills and life discipline. He also considered to take second gap year but he gave up after the evaluate the situations of gap year people in Turkey. His previous bad and misguided experiences prevented his second gap year decision due to feeling stress regarding money, future position and social pressure. He took examples about his gap year experience by pointing out some examples of his peers' experiences, as well.

> P12: It is good to take a gap year but I wish I was prepared for another field. I wish I was prepared for social sciences or cinema-theater. There was a decrease in my exam score. I said I wish I would go (to university). It was better if I didn't stay...
>
> R: Have you thought about doing a gap year again?
> P12: I thought about it. Because I'm already good even if I don't study in social sciences. Especially in History. But I could not handle it (second gap year). Neither my environment could allow me to do this, nor I could... So I guess I could blow someone up. They would piss me off that much. Gap year life is very difficult. That pressure is also. You are a bit more comfortable preparing for the exam in the 12th grade. If you cannot manage it (studying), you could take a gap year. No problem. I'm free during the gap year. But during the gap year, you force yourself as I have to go (to university) this year. I will do it in some way. I can't quit again. Everyone's eyes are on me. My family spent a lot of money. Thoughts like these and that. Despite their good intentions, their constant questions about your goals and studying routine are annoying… The process made me think about the second gap year, but it was an instant thought.

Differences after the gap year is over

Young people who had experienced a gap year shared their knowledge about what changes happened after the end of the process. In this category, the participants compared their experiences depending on activities of senior high school year with the gap year activities. Majority of the participants stated that they studied hard during the gap year and got a higher score in university entrance exam. Participant 14 expressed the belief that increasing the score will provide her better educational opportunities.

> P14: I mean, if I went with 29,000 ranking last year, where would it be? Bingol (a city in the South Eastern part of Turkey) or something. If I went to Bingol, the education that I will get would not be good. I do not want to humiliate Bingol's

education, but its education is not that good. I believe that when I go to Konya (one of the metropolitan cities in Turkey), Selcuk University, I will get a good education. So at least, I changed that**.**

Some participants stated that there was not much change in their exam results. Even if they aim to have a better result, they could not get a higher score on their second attempt. Participant 12 and Participant 24 clarified that even though the gap year period did not enable them to enhance their exam score, they found their interests and explore the management strategies of their life course.

P12: At the end of my gap year, my exam result did not change, but in terms of improving my perspectives on my life, I say I'm glad I did.

P24: I can't take another year. God bless! Well, it was a process that I said; magnificent. In the first year, I got to know myself. I said I can't do math. Besides, now I realize that I have to know what I want. I have to set my own goals. I have to make my own decisions. I became aware of this in the first year. I had an enlightenment at that moment. I wanted to stand on my own feet.

Francis et. al. (2016) scrutinized the increasing number of candidates retaking the university entrance exam and its relation with learning outcomes in their research titled ″better luck next time″. They emphasized that the two basic variables which are the learning outcomes and the choice of retaking, are important on the exam results of the retakers. Although they said that the number of attempts of taking the exams might well increase the learning level, choosing to retake the exam may vary depending on which academic track of students take the exam. Thus, it is important to note that the score change that will emerge by retaking the exam is related to the student's studying performance, academic background and commitment to personal goals (Francis et. al., 2016). Although most of the participants stated that they gained the opportunity to enroll in a better university as an advantage by spending the time efficiently compared to their first exam scores, a few participants stated that there is a risk of getting a lower score after taking a gap year. Participant 20 responded that due to the stress which arises from being failed in the first exam might be a demotivational factor during gap year. That might cause a belief in getting a lower score on the second exam even though a gap year provides a convenient time for studying.

P20: Sometimes it can be worse, too. Let’s say, I took the exam in the first year but I failed. I may fail in the second exam, as well. In fact, this is a more stressful way of taking the exam after a gap year. After your first attempt, you already have

> a gap year opportunity. But when the retaken exams increase, you may ask what if I cannot achieve it this year, as well? You already failed last year. You know, it's actually a little harder to take the exam with this position. So, gap year… I wish we did not (take a gap year). If I had studied just a little bit more, if I had noticed sooner and had tried a little harder during my gap year, I would have changed my result even more. I know that. Because we actually add information on our previous academic background.

Although the participants expressed that they were more experienced when they took the second exam, another study found that the level of life satisfaction and self-perception among those who took the exam for the first time or for the second time are similar (Erol et. al., 2015). Moreover, another study concluded that those who took the exam for the once felt more comfortable than those who took the exam for the twice before entering the university entrance exam (Barlas et. al., 2010). The statements of the participants contradict the results of these studies. Participants stated that the gap year offered a better preparation for the university entrance exam and they overcame their excitement a little more because they entered the second exam with the experiences which were gained in the first exam.

Reactions to decision of taking a gap year

Taking a gap year decision also includes some messages from the environment. In this category, the reactions that were given against the decision of gap year by family, relatives, friends, teachers and other groups were examined. To evaluate the responses of participants more precisely, interpretations are gathered under two parts namely positive and negative reactions that were made by the environment to their gap year decision. Besides, understanding the family demographics of the participants contributed to the analysis of the messages received by the environment. However, the educational status of the parents, professions of father and mother and the number of siblings who continue their education are demonstrated above Table 4. Almost all of the participants took both positive and negative reactions from their environment. These reactions were described from the perspectives of the participants. Majority of the participants stated that positive messages from parents, relatives, teachers and friends encourage them along with the gap year decision. Conversely, the participants who prepared for the exam again during the gap year period had many negative comments from their parents, relatives, teachers, friends and environment. Moreover, the participants emphasized that the positive

statements of the environment have an overt and covert side. A few participants noted that although the gap year decision was supported by their social surroundings, people had a higher expectation from them. These expectations were reflected in a hidden way by supposed to not being noticed by the participant.

> P2: My family supported it. But the environment had better expectations. They did not have a bad comment on me, but you can understand.

> P23: Others look at you like if she did not achieve it (exam) previous year, she could not do it this year and so on. And once you get into that position (gap year), you know you are graduated and out of school, it is a bit difficult to get used to.

On the other hand, the participants who were criticized by their environment and received negative responses by pointing they felt these messages as a stress factor during the whole gap year. Participant 12 stated that apart from his family, the environment and relatives criticized his position based on his exam result and his financial burden to his family.

> P12: Everybody knows I am successful. Someone from the neighbors who don't know me personally just asked about my exam result. I told. He did not let me explain anymore. Questions bother you. Despite their good intentions, this attitude has a negative impact on (young) people. Except for my parents, my brothers and aunts put a bit of pressure on me. They exaggerated. They said, you wasted the tutor's expenses. They said, you were not interested in your studies.

Also, Participant 21 emphasized that although her family has a good income, the expenses that are made for her during the gap year were taunted by her mother. This position made her feel under high pressure.

> P21: You have already taken a gap year. The pressure of the first exam is on you. They (family) already pay my expenses for studying at a private education center. There is money pressure on you. What a money pressure! I wish I had never gone to a private school and it wasn't for the money pressure. I don't know, people who have families like mine are experiencing this situation. I think they experienced it. They make you exhausted. "I bought you test books; how can you not succeed? Why are those test books empty? Why don't you do it…" Why, why, why! Always a question! And there is such a problem in Turkish families that I can't listen to my child's psychology. This happens only in foreign TV series. They say, "the problem is psychological, that's it.". For example, "Mom, I cannot get up, I am exhausted.", she says "It is psychological, that's it. If you do not think about it, it won't be such a problem." There is always this. So just like that.

There are some paid expenses as a result of activities that are carried out in the gap year and most of the expenses of young people are covered by families. The most dominant effects of preparing for the university entrance exam on young people comes with financial expenses. Many families do not trust the public schools' education and they want to enroll their children in private education centers or take additional online or face to face courses by different instructors (Çınar, 2006). Consequently, the participants also highlighted that they had a similar experience as it is mentioned in Çınar's (2006) study. They were financially pressured, and they were often exposed to this pressure verbally. Here, it is emphasized how the messages received from the environment of the participants reveal their money problems. Costs of the gap year activities were discussed separately in the title of gap year expenses.

Some participants pointed out that they gained more stress during the gap year. These participants affirmed that they had more stress compared to previous year because they felt the risk of failure in the exam again. Participant 10 who took a gap year twice stated that young people who have a gap year for two years may have difficulties to reach their goals. He pointed out that the received messages from the environment are major challenges that make the gap year difficult.

> P10: …Stress is caused by fear of failure. It creates anxiety... I do not think that the students who took the exam twice will not achieve to be in the first 1000 ranked students in the exam. Why? Because people have had this failure twice. The load of two years on his back has become heavy. His family has seen him failed twice. Relatives see your failure twice. Even when you walk on the street; they say that he has been walking these roads to go to a private education center for 2 years. So what do you mean? It's a difficult thing to even describe. But I am aware of that. I think I observed this well. I think that I have thought about this well and I have the opportunity to break something (opinions of others) down because I have thought about it. That's hard.

In addition, there were some participants who emphasized that the families adopted a monitoring attitude during the gap year. Participants indicated that families do not ask their opinions. They tried to choose so-called good decisions for their boys or girls. These monitoring and questioning attitudes of the parents victimized the participants in achieving their future goals. They do not know about the exact goals of their children and do not know even their interests. Participants stated that they are misled by misconceptions of the parents, friends and teachers, as well. It means that the parents and even teachers might lose their prestige in the eyes of young people.

P24: At first I chose the Turkish-Math academic track. They (family) changed my mind and directed it to the Science academic track. This wrong choice costs me a year. One of my relatives was a guidance teacher. He said, if you get a degree of equal weight academic track you will be unemployed. You will be poor! Imagine, that's what the guidance teacher says. Who should I talk to? Equal weight academic track has many graduates. He said, equal weight academic track would throw you back on the exam in terms of ranking. Chemistry teacher from my high school said, your chemistry is very good in 9th and 10th grades. You should continue the science academic track. They (teachers) changed my mind too. My sister is a math teacher. My brother is a construction engineer. Both are from the science academic track. Then I said why not to choose this. My academic track selection story was that. I knew I could not achieve at the exam before I took it. I took the exam knowing that I would fail. That's how I did a gap year... They don't know what you want. You are being misled because they don't know you.

P23: My family did not want me to go to a far city (for the university). You know, they do not want to send me to any other places. They do not want Mugla (a city in Mediterranean region) or anything. They even changed my preferences before I saw it.

R: How is that possible? Is not this your personal account?

P23: They learned my information to login to my preference page. They did. My father met with my school principal. They got my information from there. Two of my preferences have been deleted. I noticed later. Also, I noticed it on the last day of the preferences and of course I could not do anything. I mean, those were my decisions. They must respect. That's how I expected. But they did not. Ok, I was so sad actually. Because after all, I have my department I want, I can find new opportunities. I thought I'd improve in every way. In that way, I did not lose my hope. I would like to go to a different city. But it did not happen. It is destiny.

P21: The score of the law department is high, of course. Medicine or law. Such professions are few in our family. Not in our family, but in many families. Title matters. Now new professions have emerged such as media, television, etc. They do not care about those jobs.

They say, you do not need to study and do not need to go to university for these professions. So, that’s the reason why my parents are still not satisfied with my current department. They still say, why could not you study law?

Lastly, 2 female participants stated that while they are planning a gap year for their future educational goals, they received encouraging feedback for marriage from their environment. Participant 18 explained the mentality of her environment.

P18: Just a few friends said, “Choose (a university) randomly! Why are you bothering yourself?” And here, there is something like this, your marriage age is

coming. “When the school is over, get married.” The mentality of my friends and relatives was like that. But I did not care.

Gap Year Activities

After graduating from high school young people organize some activities for a gap year. Most prominent gap year studies which are conducted by Jones (2004) and Snee (2010) implied that this time span is accepted as self-developmental activities. To elaborate more, gap year activities mean mainly travelling (personally or organized), volunteering, paid working or internship, learning and leisure activities or combination of these groups of ventures (Jones, 2004; Snee, 2010). In this respect, gap year activities are categorized under this theme. Participants explained their experiences of being out of school. During this time, participants made some expenses for their selected activities. Moreover, they changed their daily habits compared to last year. At the end, they made an overall evaluation of their one year break and noted the advantages and disadvantages of the gap year. It was observed that the participants created different road maps within the scope of their abovementioned future goals. As the majority of the participants pointed out that they preferred to prepare for the university entrance exam again with the support of private education centers. While some participants continued to work individually with the help of training modules or private tutor support. On the other hand, a few participants had a job to cover their expenses as well as going to the private education center during certain periods of the gap year.

The main goal of the participants is to get a desired score from the exam and narrow their achievement gaps during the gap year. Participant 7 necessarily chose to go to a private education center in order to create a studying ambiance for himself. He clarified the situation as he could not find a decent working environment due to the poor conditions of the region he lives in. He added that if there is a convenience to study at home such as having a private room, table, stationery equipment, internet connection, test books and etc., there is no need to go to a private education center. Creating that studying environment had been a financial cost for him due to the poor financial situation, as well.

P7: …Mostly on the Eastern side of Turkey, they (students) do not have a personal room at home. Well, how to say, as I said, there is no studying environment. They (parents) call you first when there are errands to do. That’s the reason why you have troubles. You cannot get enough studying efficiency at home. It is impossible

> to study at all. Like I said, it (gap year activity) varies from person to person. It depends on the conditions.

Although most participants easily overcame expenses with the financial support of their parents, a few participants struggled with gap year expenses due to the poor financial conditions. Yamanoğlu (2006) elaborated on the costly preparation process of university entrance exam in Turkey. According to this study, young people are deprived of supportive education mechanisms due to poor financial status and this puts them at a disadvantage in university entrance exam. Therefore, it might be noted that the institutionalization of a liberal market economy has an impact on education in Turkey. This demonstrated that the opportunity to access qualified education is dependent on having a decent level of economic capital. Although the Participant 7 lacks of economic capital to improve his academic knowledge; he worked, saved money and enrolled in a private education center to create a study environment for him.

Significantly, there are young people who spend their gap year completely wasting time by using the name of studying. They received help from a private education institution, which is one of the most common activities carried out during the gap year, to pretend to be studying against their families. Participant 21 elicited that young people who use the private education institutions as a socialization place rather than a studying center.

> P21: Everybody is older than you in the private education center. But nobody studies. There is such a generation. Everyone comes to the private education center, but they go out and do other things. They are out of class. But their family knows they are in class. Just like that. In our class, about 5 people registred the university when we include me and my friend. The private education center is definitely seen as a socialization place. My friends also agree with me. That's it.

Although the studies indicate a private education center provides an environment to study harder and prepare candidates for the exam (Çolak, 2006), the participants emphasized that some young people use the centers for socialization without studying hard during the gap year. Similarly, Participant 8 who preferred to study individually during the gap year bought self-driven training sets for the exam and explained that he utilized the training sets to please his parents and prove his interest to study for the examination to them.

> P8: I worked with the ROUND training set. I bought it to show my interest. So, I could have paid for something. To make my family comfortable. It did not help

> much. I did not study regularly. Do not let my father hear. I made a schedule. Then I started to go to the library. I did not bore and force myself.

When the participants answered the question of what activities are being done except for studying during the gap year, the majority pointed out that there was nothing to say for gap year people other than retaking the exam. A few participants expressed that there are some young people who are interested in other activities apart from retaking the exam. They decided to drop out from education, start business life, be social media influencers or get married. Participant 21 and Participant 17 clarified the activities of these young people.

> P21: The majority of boys are working. There are also girls working, but most of them are at home, doing chores. The vast majority of them do something on social media rather than study. I am never into it. Never. Candidates in my private education center were very strange. A girl in my class was already saying "My father sent me here. I will not work after college even if I win a university. I will get married. I don't like to work." I said, "so, what are you doing here?". Now, she has registered for a 2 years-program. She also announced her so-called success on Instagram, like a poster. What a success! Because people do not know about higher education and they say "Wow!". They suppose that she won a university. She did not study for a while; she was just showing off. She says that I worked hard. Actually, she did nothing. She was with us and at least we know the reality. Come on, don't do it!

> P17: No, unfortunately. Because people think that human life is ordinary. So, you studied, then you studied again, you got married, then it's over. So that's it. Of course, I would not want to go through that way, at least for myself. Because I do not have that mentality. But when we look at the country's context, I chose the same way as we could due to the fact that it is impossible to see the future without a university diploma. You know, I may postpone studying at university a bit and can gain some more life experiences. But unfortunately, when I think about inconvenient conditions, I chose the ensured and secure path (retaking). I think most people take a gap year for this. I think everyone thought of other activities.

Although the gap year phenomenon emerged as a timespan that includes numerous activities, the participants evaluated activities of the gap year with a focus that retaking the university entrance exams. According to the interpretation of Participant 9, although some young people have started to work after graduation from high school, they returned to education by admitting that the business life was not satisfactory.

> P9: All my environment, all my friends, spent that year by retaking the university entrance exam. I had a friend. He had started to work after high school. But he worked for money. He retook the exam at the end of the year. The aim of that (gap) year is to retake the university entrance exam.

Gap Year without School

Since the gap year period covers a period of interruption to education, young people do not officially perpetuate their formal education during this period. Young people are away from school for the first time in their lives after taking a gap year decision. Having no student status during the gap year caused elusive experiences for the participants. Since schools have many structured educational activities which are supervised by teachers and school administration, students should follow the rules regardless of their willingness or not. Half of the participants affirmed that the absence of the school is a good opportunity in terms of having more active time to focus on their goals without any distraction. Participant 12 interpreted his profitable experiences during the gap year by highlighting his wasted experiences at high school.

> P12: The time was dying at school for 11 hours. We were wasting so much time at school. Sometimes the teachers did not attend the class, etc. The good thing in the gap year is freedom. You can do whatever you want. I went to the gym. I watched too many TV series and movies. I have not read many books. It would be nice if I read it. But I did not read it. School life is really a waste of time. There are so many redundant lessons. Gap year is good especially in terms of having time.

Importantly, some participants indicated that they were confused and felt lost in the absence of school. Participant 8 stated his experiences regarding feeling lost during the gap year.

> P8: I felt lost. It was boring. School was like work. Most of my life was spent there. When you graduate, you feel lost. I was leaning back to school. When I left school, I rolled for a while. I tried to look for passion for myself during the gap year.

Finally, a few participants illustrated that there was no change and they filled the space of school through enrolling in other private education institutions. Participant 20 clarified that the private education center filled the place of school during the gap year.

> P20: …To be honest, since I went to a private education center, it was similar to the school environment. But it was still more comfortable. Because the school is also strict. Disciplinary penalties, this and that. The private education center is a bit like a university environment. Relax. Everything depends on you. When you take a gap year, it's like, you're taking your own responsibilities a bit.

Expenses of Gap Year

Gap year has created a number of expenses within the concepts of the activities and living conditions of the youth. Most of the participants stated that the cost of test books and copying expenses of studying materials were the major expenses during the gap year. Some participants noted that the total cost of private education institution was a huge financial burden. Regarding this, participants mentioned the daily fees of public transportation that they paid to go to the library or private education institution. Likewise, participants elaborated that the essential needs such as eating and drinking out were a fiscal load during the gap year. Some participants stated that they prepared their meals at home and brought their meals in a private education institution. While a few participants justified that the gap year did not cost much, some of them claimed that the payments for special tutors were an expenditure. Participant 1 expressed that he helped his family by working to pay for his expenses due to expenses of the gap year that put his family in a financial burden.

> P1: A father who works with the minimum wage, cannot afford to cover these expenses. For sure. A middle class family also struggles. It might be difficult for them or not. It depends on the supplies that they bought for their house. Let me tell you this, there is an average of 12,000 Turkish liras (₺) for the private education center. If the private education center is not nearby, there is an average bus price of 3.5 ₺ for students. Round trip fare is 7 ₺. So for an ordinary student the daily cost is 10 ₺ even if he is thrifty. This would make 200 ₺ monthly if he go out for 20 days. Let me put it this way, for an ordinary person, there is a cost of books, pens so on so forth, approximately 25.000 ₺ definitely purchased in a year. Also, book prices were extremely high during my gap year period. There was such a shortage of paper then. Prices were too expensive. Still the same, as well. My family covered my expenses. I worked for 4 months together with my private education training. I received a monthly salary for 4 months. I gave them to my father. I can say that I have covered three-quarters of the cost of a private education center by myself.
>
> R: Where did you work?
> P1: I worked as a part-time cashier in a supermarket.

The main concern about preparation for university entrance exam depends on the financial situation of young people. Although the admission fees are high, families want to send their students to the private education center (Çolak, 2006). This financial burden puts not only the families but also the young people in trouble. Almost all of the participants' gap year expenses were covered by their family. In order to support their

family, two participants worked as part-time employee besides receiving support from their family. Participant 7, who is from a lower-class family (his family does not have any income indeed), admitted that he covered all his expenses during the gap year with the income that he earned by working on the weekends.

> P7: I worked during the gap year. 1 month in Bursa, 1 month in Samsun, 1 month in Antalya. So, I spent my saved money for a private education center. It is not supported by my parents. I was enrolled in a private education center with my own efforts. I went to the private education center during my gap year… How did I manage both working and studying? Since I was doing a gap year, the classes were generally on weekdays. I was at class during the mornings on weekdays. I was going to the library in the afternoon. On the weekend, I was working as a busboy in cafes, coffee houses, and such places like these.

Total cost of expenses is a restricting factor in proceeding education activities. This results in the fact that young people from low-class families have to work to cover their studying expenses during the gap year process. When it is delved into the experiences of the gap year takers, young people from low-class families have a money oriented mindset to reach their goals (Goumei & Wei, 2017). Participants clearly add the pressure of the money in the gap year process and give them another tension to deal with. Participant 12 expressed that his friend's father complained to him about his daughter's expenses during the gap year.

> P12: I have a neighbor friend. We sometimes met with her father in a public minibus. My friend did not mention it, but her father told me "we made expenses for her again" like that. He said such things. I mean, if this man tells me about his daughter's situation like that, he would definitely tell her at home. I think he's also putting pressure on his daughter.

Lastly, as Participant 1 explained the total cost of the gap year, he questioned whether the cost of the gap year equals with the one-year working income or not. In this regard, he implied that when people take a gap year, they postpone their university graduation as they delay their business life. He emphasized that the decision of a gap year should be taken by considering financial loss.

> P1: …Losing for a year means graduating one year late from university. This means finding a job one year later or losing one-year's salary. If we calculate an average monthly salary is 3.000 ₺ to 5.000 ₺, it is a loss of 50.000 ₺ for one year. This is the financial part.

Change of Habits

During the gap year, the participants noted that they gave up some of the habits they had during the 12th grade and acquired new ones. Majority of the participants stated that they prepared a new study plan. The purpose of adapting to a new study plan is that the university entrance exam needs to be prepared in more systematic strategies. Almost two-thirds of the participants stated that they made well developed daily plans in a way to prioritize the study. Participant 22 clarified her changed habit and daily routines.

> P22: 12th grade prevented me from preparing for the exam unintentionally. I chose to go a private education center with the idea that it would be useful. The overlap between my private education center classes and my school made me tired. I felt a lot of stress that those both gave at the same time. There is also homework from here (school) and there (private education center). Exams and stuff. These made me tired. So, when I took a gap year, I explored how nice it is to have studying order. During the gap year, I supposed that I could never work during the day. When the whole day was busy in 12th grade, I was studying at night. I had a routine like that. But I realized during the gap year that when you have a regular schedule, it's nice to work during the day. I gained discipline in the gap year period and did a good job. I think it (studying) was less, but more efficient. All in all, the important thing is to study efficiently.

Since the participants have to study for a year and they want to earn the universities that they desire, candidates inevitably reduce their social relations, as they have to study for one year and to earn the desired departments (Çınar, 2006). To reach their goals, they balanced the time allocated for eating and drinking, listening, studying and spending time with their family. Therefore, they realized their responsibilities to be successful on the exam compared to the last year of high school and they felt more mature in terms of defining the tangible future career goals at the end of the gap year (O'Shea, 2014). In this respect, similar results were found in the study with the literature.

Over half of participants agreed with the statement that they put limitations on their social life and spent less time with their friends in order to focus on their future goals. Minority of the participants stated that they quitted to use social media which they allowed more time to spend before. Participants also marked that they stopped playing computer games. Participant 7 explained that he comprehended the importance of time during the preparation of the exam and experienced time management by decreasing the activities of social life.

> P7: I cut off communication with people (during the gap year). I started to chat with just a few people. I started using less social media, or even no social media at all. I started to study more. I used to work for 2 hours and it was enough. But during the gap year, I was starting in a private education center at 7 am and leaving at 7 pm. You're getting a bit quiet. You pull yourself back. You do not communicate with anyone any more…. I quit using the phone, as well. No social media. There was only WhatsApp. It helps me to share some exam questions with my friends.

Advantages and Disadvantages

In that category, advantages and disadvantages of the gap year period are explained in the light of the experiences of the participants. According to participants' interpretations, there are both positive and negative consequences when the gap year is over. Half of participants noted that gap year enabled them to become more experienced individuals. Here, they have already experienced managing stress and concerns regarding their higher education previous year. Therefore, they compared themselves with their previous year's position and realized some personal mistakes which are related to studying strategies for the exam. The participants stated that they have reorganized their previous educational career preferences in a more logical way during gap year due to the fact that gap year enabled them more convenient time for designing their future. Participants elaborated that the gap year provides an opportunity to get to know themselves, to evaluate the occupations that are suitable for them, and to make research about their future career apart from studying for the exam intensively. They highlighted that there is more time to think and focus on their future goals. In addition, the participants appreciated the supportive environment that they established with their peers who are in the same position. Their friendship is strengthened and they become more mature individuals in communication, self-confidence, budget management and mainly on life course management.

However, there are more disadvantages than advantages when the whole gap year period has been evaluated by the participants. First of all, the gap year took one-year time of the participants compared to their peers who already started university after graduating from high school, no matter how the gap year is spent. Participants expressed that the meaning of gap year is starting one year later than peers and falling behind them. Furthermore, participants implied that seeing their friends in university campus, especially through social media, put pressure on them to be successful. Consequently,

they underlined that they felt more responsibility in themselves regarding studying hard. Participant 7 illustrate his experiences regarding feeling depressed when he compared himself with their peers who enrolled in university.

> P7: I mean, people always say, your friends share photos from university campus on Instagram. You are still studying. To be honest, I felt this way. I got that it was a reality. Your friends share photos from their university environment. I haven't experienced anything like that yet. But it seemed a little bit comfortable. At that time, of course, you feel a bit depressed.

In the transition period from high school to college, young people compare themselves with their peer group in terms of their skill sets, credentials and potential future employability in order to be more distinguished among them (King, 2011). While the participants take on the challenges of gap year, they try to stand strong in the higher education race by comparing themselves with their peers. It indicates that the exam-oriented mentality is an issue for feeling like a marathoner position among young people. Participant 11 elaborated the advantages and disadvantages of his gap year period and emphasized that before taking the university entrance exam, there is pressure on candidates which is sourced by feeling like in a marathon.

> P11: During the gap year, you now know that you need to achieve something. You focus on your target eagerly. This is one of its advantages. You start to study more devotedly and in a disciplined way. Apart from that, the pressure is too high. You are turning over 18. You will be 19. Now, you think you should get into a university. The pressure and how to say, the desire to resist the things brought by the environment has increased much more on me.
>
> R: What is this pressure caused by?
> P11: The world is spinning with money. Because we have to earn a certain amount of money and prestige. To achieve goals in your own life and fulfill your dreams. Therefore, there are certain job groups or there are certain universities that can provide you with those things in a short time. This can train you. As myself, I thought that I had to acquire this quality and I had to go above a certain level. When I see my friends around me who can achieve this, it inevitably creates pressure. Because nobody wants to study at 3rd or 4th class (low-ranked) universities. However, it is difficult to win 1st class universities and there is a serious race among the students. There is serious competition. When there is someone running behind you in this race, you are trying to catch up to the person ahead of you. It is impossible to have no pressure.

A few participants clarified that there is an exhaustion which was raised by following the same study routine for the exam. Participants struggled to study for the

same exam subjects and solved the identical type of questions again as they did previous year. Although the participants got more experiences compared to fresh 12th graduates at the exam, the changeable structure of the exam is not providing such an opportunity for themselves. Participants stated that unexpected situations could turn the process into a disadvantage by emphasizing the changes in the content of university entrance exam in 2020. In the last university entrance exam, there were some changes regarding dates, exam content and new rules for sanitation because of the COVID-19 crisis (OSYM, 2020). Therefore, participants stated that they are tired of adapting to the new structure of the exam. Finally, all of these might be seen as the consequences of the academic precarity (Chinnery, 2015) of the young people in Turkey. Participant 1 explained the unexpected situations caused by the governmental modifications on the exam. While he emphasized the gap year is not disappointing for him overall, he clarified the disadvantages of the gap year by considering that the gap year cost a lot.

> P1: When it comes to the spiritual part, people get tired after a while. Because, you failed in first year and retook the exam. You studied for two years. You work like you don't have a life for 4 years on average. If you don't have a plan, you cannot find time for yourself. But if there is, as I said, the time is enough for you. This process was not a disadvantage for me. Everyone deserves a second chance (retaking). But not the third. I am very against to the third. Because he could not do it in the first two years, and with this motivation, the third year would not be achieved definitely. If anyone can do it, I appreciate that. I have friends who have a gap year for three or four years. In the third year or the fourth year, they screw up. They say, I wish I had chosen in the first year. The third year is impossible. No way. Half of the graduates who take gap year are eliminated. Why? Most of them have already taken the exam. They see themselves as more experienced and they use that experience for the next year. But this is not possible in this country. Everything (exam system) changes every year.

Some participants stated that they experienced short-term stress disorders which caused health problems and psychological breakdowns. Participants stated that they experienced financial pressure on them because they felt that they were putting the family under a burden to cover the expenses. However, they stated that they were exposed to negative messages from the environment and social pressure during the gap year. They highlighted that the fear of failure and the risk of a gap year is a disadvantage. Participant 14 summarized the stressors by indicating these challenges.

> P14: You are preparing for 1 year. Nice amount of money is running away. Your efforts may go in vain. Also, you may see pressure from the environment. When

> you're walking on the street, for example, the mother of a friend who I don't know from primary school asks about exam results. They're making fun of you. Then you can hear gossip about you. There is a lot of pressure, and it comes back to you somehow. As I said, I did not enjoy eating for a while. I had sleep deprivation. Then, I wanted to sleep continuously for a period. My stomach was aching. I was about to tear my hair off. I was crying. It was a very strange time. I mean, this period has a big impact on your psychology. Yes, uncertainty hurts. I am still a student and could not settle into university. But the pressure really hurts. Apart from that, my family knows that I want to be a teacher. When the exam results came, the pressure period started again because I failed on my goal. I think most people are more understanding than family. My family said; "but you want to be a teacher, why don't you want to go to these places (that you already achieved)?". I do not want those cities. Their education is not good in my opinion. I'm used to being in the big city. I'm running away from small cities. Then, they don't want the cities that I propose to my family. They said; if you can't become a teacher, then what will you be? etc. It is a period of great pressure and controversy. It was very tiring at that time.

Young people have different kinds of positive or negative psychological situations depending on which activities they choose for the gap year period (O'Shea, 2014). In this case, a few participants had psychological disorders because of choosing to retake the university entrance exam. Their gap year choice brought with the received critical reflections from the environment. It is clearly noticed that having no social status, expenses and future expectations of the families are the main indicators of the social pressure upon the young people. Aypay and Sever (2015) noted that parents' pressure on their children to continue studying not only causes the GPA of the students to decrease, but also causes burnout. As a matter of fact, it is observed that young people were faced with more oppressive behaviors by their families, as the families have certain future expectations for their children. This approach causes unnecessary stress on participants during the gap year. Due to these reasons, participants underlined that they have any status in society during the gap year. They were not seen as students despite they were in the process of studying for the exam again. Furthermore, they were deprived of the rights that students benefit from, such as the student wage scale in public transport, health and insurance services provided by the government, student passports etc. Participants gave examples depending on their experiences as follows.

> P4: …Transportation was a problem in Ankara. Well, there was a discount card for students. When the government did not count us as a student, I was using my sibling's card. There is also a penalty if I was caught while doing this. Thanks to God, I made it.

P17: There was my aunt's wedding. We had to go abroad. We couldn't go because of the Coronavirus, but for example, since I am preparing for university now, I was not a student. I couldn't even go abroad in this situation. Why? They would say you are not a student, you are free. So this is an example. I can go now if I want. But I couldn't go before. The embassy would have asked me about this. You are going to Amsterdam. They may say, "Why are you leaving your country, why are you coming to my country?". Because you are not a student. You know, will you stay or will you come back? Frankly, they wouldn't give it to me. To be honest, they would not give it (visa) to me, that's it.

P10: …Oh, and something is very bad. Gap year! I can't stop myself once I start on this. And I also had it for 2 years. You are not a student, that is a very bad thing. I am 20 years old. I went to the hospital and I learned that now I have the SGK (Social Security Institution) dept about 1360 ₺ or something. It's like a joke. I also have FMF disease. I need to have a medical analysis. I went to the hospital. The officer at the door told me that your social security is over. Are you a student? he asked. I am not. He said that if you are over 20 years old, you can no longer benefit from your father's insurance. The check-up fee is 50 ₺. Plus, medicines, tests and their costs will be added separately. It was such a disastrous year for me. You have no place in society either. You cannot benefit from anything on behalf of being a student. No public institution believes that you are a student! Okay, it could be two years or three years. Maybe I am too idealistic. Maybe I want to study medicine. I believe it will be worth it (gap year). This is a really big problem. This may be the biggest issue for the students.

The participants unearthed unnoticed but significant issues regarding social rights of young people, specifically public transport, health services and other legal affairs during the gap year. Gap year takers, as an out of school youth, have no tangible social status in the society. They are included in the NEET population and the term has been used by the policymakers to revitalize the youth employability and future of education (Yüce, Gülüm & Karakaş, 2020). The participants state that they are not accepted as students during the gap year period. It is somewhat controversial whether student rights should be given to the young people during the gap year. Although gap year people want to prepare for the exam again, governments have a certain budget to support the student population, and the topic that individuals who lost their student status should provide their own financial livelihood is open to discussion.

The Gap Year Phenomenon in Turkey

Under this theme, perception of the gap year phenomenon is revealed in the Turkish context based on experiences of the participants. Society has different perceptions on the graduate market, higher education and employment. These have an

impact on conceptualization of gap year experience in Turkey. First, the challenges regarding types of support that participants would like to have during the gap year and from whom they want to get them. Second, desired activities of the gap year are elaborated through the experiences of participants. These activities are desired but unfulfilled by the participants. Although the participants contemplate various activities for the gap year, the majority of them stated that they have limited choices in Turkey's case. Finally, participants explained the impacts of the COVID-19 on the gap year. In addition to the participants' experiences, they also mentioned their friends who had a gap year. As it is statistically indicated in Table 1, the number of young people who are at a status of high school graduate (unsettled or unregistered in higher education) cannot be underestimated in Turkey. Even though the reasons for the gap year are different, participants' explanations proved that the gap year was the most preferable trend among young people before starting a university. Two participants who took gap year twice clarified that this decision apparently emerges as a trend among their peers.

> P11: 20% of my class was registered (into a university). 80%, which I think is a considerable percentage, took a gap year. Because, there are certain professions and departments that have gained a certain respect in the eyes of students or teachers. When a student fails to enter one of these (departments), he thinks that he will be pressured by his environment and his future will not be shaped. That's the reason why many of my friends who have 40.000 or 50.000 ranking, which is a situation that can be considered a success for many students, took a gap year with the goals of medicine or engineering in top universities. This shows the problem of how our education system is narrow-minded. That's why 80% of them took a gap year despite the fact that they did well (at the exam).

> P18: Let me talk about my 12th grade. Only 2-3 people in my class enrolled in a university. To be honest, all the others, I mean 15 people, took a gap year. For example, we are 4 close girlfriends last year. Two friends enrolled in. My other friend and I took a gap year (twice). Others randomly enrolled in a university without a goal. Some people took a gap year again, some people started working, like that.

According to quotations of the participants, a gap year is not only a decision given spontaneously by youth. This decision has been taken under some circumstances. While most young people choose the gap year for their future wellbeing, some of them took more than one gap year. Over the past few decades, young people who are in the transition from youth to adulthood have been confused due to contemporary social and structural changes in society. They are into a more uncertain era than previous generations which means the flexible and sophisticated transition period shows that there are fewer points

of taking as a reference to determine their future life (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). In this regard, the youth has been in a position to feel insecure for the future, overloaded with educational credentials or lost in society thereby they seek for time to think more about their life or postpone their higher education by the intention of studying more for the exam. Couple of participants pointed out the people who take a gap year three or four times.

> P1: …Yeah, I have friends who took gap years for three or four years. In the third year, in the fourth year, they decrease their score more. They say I wish I had registered (a university) in the first year.
>
> P17: One of my friends is doing her fourth gap year. She still could not enter the university. She had no academic background and also had family problems. I think she could not achieve because she constantly confronts these situations.

The participants express that students prepare for the university entrance exam again for the upcoming year in their transition to university. The accumulation of these high school graduates is noticeably high. The fact that gap year is considered just preparation for university entrance exam again by pointing out a problematic situation in the transition to higher education. Young people who are not able to enroll in a university prepare again and retake the exam with the first-time candidates. This situation causes fluctuation of the ranking among candidates and the majority of the first-time takers cannot show their expected performance at the exam due to the accumulation of previous year's graduates. Participant 6 detailed this situation;

> P6: …But rankings depend on your scores. For example, you can reach 50.000 ranking with the 400-point score last year, but this year you can reach 100.000 ranking with the same score. So, while the ranking doubled, there was no change in the score. Last year, I increased my score from 300 points to 400 points. But my rank is still 100.000. As a result, there was no change in my ranking. My score has just increased.
>
> R: What is the reason for this?
> P6: The reason is that there are many people who took a gap year.
>
> The number of candidates who took the exam was also high. Everyone is a little more conscious about the situation. Since everyone makes more score, most candidates passed the lower level candidates. Normally, if the target is here, it is up there (showing the rise with his hand). They have started to race above this limit. People have increased their scores. But the ranking has not changed. Because the fresh graduates (first-time takers) have just come.

On the other hand, the participants clarified the reason why some low-scoring candidates decided to register at a university. Participants confirmed that there is a cohort of young people who enrolled in a university without any goals. Although they know that they will not be satisfied with the department they will enroll in, the anticipated difficulties of the gap year period prevent them from making a gap year decision. They randomly choose a university that is coherent with their rankings after the results of the exam have been announced. Participant 9 elaborated the mentality of his friends who registered in a university with a random choice.

> P9: …It was 50/50. Half of my class went to university, half of them took a gap year. I think it was not good a choice for them to enroll in a university in the first year. Let me give an example from a friend. He enrolled in an environmental engineering department and enrolled in. I think he could have done better. This department was not his dream. He just went without reason. There were many people enrolled in a university for no reason. The idea was "I will go and get rid of all of it!".

Two Anatolian high school graduates emphasized the challenges of the gap year by stating that it was a preference to directly drop off their education after graduating from high school. They gave examples from their surroundings about this situation. Abovementioned financial, social and psychological pressures of gap year push young people to make different choices in Turkey. As they chose universities without goals, they prefer to drop out of school. As a matter of fact, some young people do not value higher education. They believe that if they have a profession in the future, starting to work after high school makes them more qualified employees in the job market compared to university graduates. Moreover, Participant 21 stated that a person who has a bachelor's degree or not will receive the same salary in some types of jobs. She stated that this situation is a bit unfair when compared to being graduated from high school, university or not.

> P21: You will go to university or take a gap year. There are two options. Some of them drop out of school. It also happens. Of course, when we look at the job market, those who studied and those who did not get the same salary. But of course it depends on your preferences. You don't study, you work somewhere and you get the same salary. But you study for years and years and you get the minimum wage when you start a job. This is a little bit unfair. There is nothing to do.

Furthermore, Participant 21 described the process of taking a place in the job market as running in a marathon. She noted that being an ordinary university graduate will not have any future benefits in terms of getting a place in the job market.

> P21: The money expectation from a job is no longer important in this country. Think about someone studying architecture! Studying architecture is difficult. It is also financially hard. But then you are jobless. You have a dream to make a building, you want to do something and so on. Nobody (job market) makes you do such a thing. You will only be a construction contractor. I mean, these things are really happening in this country. You also study law in the same way. And now there is no point in studying law anymore. Anyone can study in a private university. There is Medipol University. The one who pays is studying there. Being in a university depends on who pays the piper calls the tune. So, getting into a university is not difficult. That's why you have to search and enroll according to what you want to do and your interest area. But someone who failed to reach the threshold score, inevitably takes a gap year. Like me.

The gap year also requires managing with uncertainty. To be more precise, constant changes in the exam structure create concerns for candidates about what they will encounter. According to the guideline of the last university entrance exam (OSYM, 2021), the exam date of 2020 YKS was announced as June 27-28. Later, it was initially postponed to July 25-26 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It changed once again and the date was announced as June 27-28. Moreover, it was announced that the subjects of the second term of high school curriculum would be exempted from the exam content. Also, the exam duration was increased by 30 minutes and the threshold score was decreased from 180 to 170. As these kinds of modifications are implemented by the government, constant changings of the examination structure give concerns and pressure to the candidates as the participants have approved. Although educational authorities and policymakers argue that the 2020 YKS has been formulated as a highly advantageous exam for candidates when it is compared to last year and next year, the candidates do not agree with this comment. The changes had a negative impact on participants, as well. Although educational authorities must change the structure of the exam because of the COVID-19 outbreak, candidates and even educational communities adversely criticized the modifications (Öztürk, 2020). Participant 22 explained the importance of being prepared for the uncertainties during the gap year.

> P22: …Taking a gap year is insane. But it is valid for our country. It might make sense if we are in another country. Madness is like this, something different happens every year. I'm angry right now, oh no! Indeed, a different exam structure

> comes out each year. We do not know what to do... Even if you take a gap year, you don't know what you are going to face. I am sure that if there were a proper system, there would never be many gap year people. Because I see that even the students who put in a lot of effort take a gap year and the environment says “you did not study!” ... I mean, it will be very cliché, but if we are a fish, they cannot say “climb a tree!”. But they say**.**

One participant explained the gap year period with the phrase "God save!". The exact meaning of this phrase in Turkish context is that if a person is sentenced in a prison, inmates welcome him/her by saying this phrase to show their wishes to him by meaning only God can save you from here. Participant 1 stated that the gap year is an unexpectedly harsh period for him and his environment.

> P1: There were many who took a gap year. The number of exam candidates is increasing. It piles up for the year. It affects the first-time takers. God save! It's a very bad situation.

Expected Support During the Gap Year

In this category, the most desirable types of support are displayed during the gap year. Over half of participants pointed out that they want to get more high-quality academic support during the gap year. At the beginning of these issues, they needed guidance from a career guidance specialist. Participants stated that they need to receive more accurate guidance from a teacher who is an expert in university entrance exam strategies, higher education preferences and career counselling. They also expected to get these support in alignment with learning new study methods, helpful exam strategies, dealing with time and stress management, and how they can shape their preferences for their future career. Participant 4 noted that although he received support from a private education center in order to study efficiently for the exam, he could not get enough benefit from career guidance service.

> P4: Obviously, I expected a guidance service while I was going to a private education center. You know, such as telling me how to study, how to make a studying schedule or what ways should I need to follow. Frankly, I expected such support from the private education center. But there was not. I apparently had such an expectation. To be honest, I did not know how to study. If there was a guide teacher, I could have taken the gap year period much healthier. I need to have a guide teacher who is an expert in his field. There was no guide teacher in the center. I was not aware of it when I registered for the course.

However, young people lack socialization due to the necessity of spending more time to study sourced by the overcrowded content of national university entrance exam. Having a high score on the exam shows that candidates know the content very well. While candidates give so much effort to acquire the content, it is a bit problematic to evaluate the success with the result of the exam scores. During transition to university the mentality of evaluating the success with exam results might decrease the mental wellbeing of youth. Participant 11 stated that candidates have to be successful in university entrance exam to refrain from the social pressure regarding evaluating the success. He highlighted that this not only promotes exam-oriented mentality in education but also puts a pressure on candidates.

> P11: Things that I need to be supported are mental health and lack of social life. Providing this support is easy, but usually it does not help the student. Because providing this support does not bring you success in the OSYM exam. Because you have to memorize and learn the things you need to memorize and learn, and you only have one year. You have to study on topics and question types. Candidates are also aware of this. The teacher can also guide you. Well he may help. You can talk about your mental health or consult a psychologist or psychiatrist. They may try to help you. But it doesn't change things, it doesn't change social pressure and success that needs to be achieved. It doesn't change the conditions.
>
> R: Well, what is the main point that has to be supported during the gap year?
>
> P11: Guidance. This is partially due to Turkey's education system. After all, we have one life. I am 18. I will never turn 18 again. I will not live in 2019 again. And since people have their own goals and certain basic motives such as socializing, having a girlfriend, or whatever, I mean, when certain desires come into play, you have to constantly suppress them. Because you "have to". You have to pass that exam. This is of course a big problem for all students. But I think that gap year is spent completely with an exam-focused mentality. You have stressors caused by exams and you think that my future depends on the exam. And actually, for all students, it is a year that should not be like this, should not be spent like this.

Some participants who could not get positive assistance from their environment stated that they should be supported with motivational comments. They expected support from their environment by mentoring. They indicated that they could not receive this encouragement from the closest family members. They awaited to get useful strategies in order to cope with all of their concerns regarding the gap year period by the environment. Furthermore, the study which examined the effect of university entrance exam on students found that the constructive and emphatic support of the family has a positive impact on

young people in the process of preparing for the exam (Çınar, 2006). According to the participants, there are some reasons for getting no useful support from the family. These are the families' lack of knowledge in education especially in university entrance exam, lack of communication, measuring the value of education with financial costs and guiding their children to so-called ensured career paths. Participants expressed their lack of family support during the gap year as follows.

> P7: …Praised for my success, I think. You want someone to be praised when you achieve something, but there is no such thing. You know that, you need to work harder. For example, you are solving a 20-question test. You answer 17 questions correctly. You have 1 blank, two mistakes on this test. Nobody says ‘well done or you did well!’. They say ‘Work harder, you have gaps’. That's why I felt a lack of support.
>
> R: From whom would you like to get this support?
> P7: I think I would like to get it from my sister. From my family. My relationship with my sister is a bit different. My older sister is like a friend of mine. For example, I say to her, I understood all about past tense topics. I have 19 correct answers in 20 questions. She does not give a reaction. So she does not understand. That's why she can't say anything. I would expect support from her.
>
> P16: Actually, I haven't been supported by people who believed that I could do it. I can say that my father is already out of the city and my mother was not very supportive. It was only myself that I found the strength to believe that I can do it. So others did not. There was a lack of it.
>
> R: Who could provide this support?
> P16: So I would like to get it from my mother. For example, as other mothers ask, “does my daughter study, does my daughter do it?”. But my mother did not. I wish she did. Actually, she trusted me. You know, she thinks that I can overcome it. Maybe that's why she says nothing. I don’t know. The reason may be a lack of communication or lack of information.
>
> P21: I would like to take my family's support. They say “If we send you to a private education center, you have to do it”. Yeah, look at it! There is a kind of mentality in families. "If I enroll you in a private education center, you have to do it!". That is the mentality. "If I'm paying money, you have to pass the exam or you have to win a department that I want!". There is such a perception. When money comes into play, families change a lot. So it is. I felt this way. I am sure that many of my peers are in the same situation.

Beyond this, Participant 22 stated that she would like to take private psychological support from a specialist, but could not receive this support by anticipating the probability of the humiliating reactions of their environment.

> P22: Maybe my lack of enthusiasm made me tired and that's why I have not a goal. I think I should have gotten support on that issue. You know, if I actually visited a specialist, it would be good for my enthusiasm. Anyway it passed. I could get support from a psychologist. I need to say that visiting a psychologist is not actually considered that way here. Psychologist is seen as a person to go when necessary, but actually it is not at all. I think we can go there, when we are confused and feel very lost, for example, if there is nobody around us to help. If I had, if I decided to get it, I would get support from a psychologist.

Lastly, young people who decide to retake the university entrance exam and take a gap year are not counted as students, and they are paid their expenses of some governmental services, travel, health insurance, hospital, food or books as a civil citizen. Thus, taking a gap year decision brings some consequences to young people. Participant 10 highlighted that some of his social rights are lost due to the fact that they do not have a certain status in the society although he decided to retake the exam and his only responsibility is to study like a student.

> P10: Health rights! I could not go to the hospital for months. Is that possible? After March, I could not go to the hospital. God save, if something had happened, a huge amount could have cost from the hospital. This is a disgrace ... In public transport, for example. You don't have a student card. You can't go anywhere. It's an absurd problem. I do not understand this... I wish book prices were reduced for students. So these are not for fancy, after all. We are not collectors. Okay, there is a price, but for example, do not get taxes from the book. It is just a test book. It is a pity, isn't it? This is about the future of these youths. I thought such things would be evaluated by the government. It would be great if there was a 5 ₺ or 10 ₺ discount for students in books.

Desired but Unfulfilled Activities of Gap Year

Activities that students desired but could not achieve during the gap year are revealed in this category. The participants answered the question of “If the university entrance exam is not compulsory, has enough financial power, has been placed in your dream university department, how would you like to spend a gap year?”. By asking that question, participants asserted what activities they would like to perform during the gap year under no condition of university entrance exam. Furthermore, distinctive answers have been received from the participants when they are asked to consider the gap year without university entrance exam. All of the participants highlighted that they would like to evaluate the gap year opportunity for having peculiar activities as opposed to what they had done. More than half of the participants expressed that they would like to improve

their perspectives, broaden their vision about life, experience new cultures and meet with new people by travelling. Also they stated that they want to spend the gap year by learning foreign languages.

> P20: I would like to travel around the world. I want to see different cultures. To learn a new language. I would like to travel the world by speaking the languages that I learned. I mean, I do not spend my time by going out to a cafe or something. I really want to see different cultures, different lifestyles instead. Exactly! I would like to start college life with those experiences. I wish I could see the different lifestyles of people and start my higher education in that way. Even if I can not travel all around the world, it would be nice to see certain countries and different cultures since that is one of my future goals.

> P17: …I would like to learn English during this period. Learning a foreign language. Since my sister is already a translator, I have an enthusiasm for such things. I think I also have a tendency. I mean, I would go to take that language training.

Some participants expressed that they want to improve themselves with personal development strategies. In addition, they emphasize the importance of being an intellectual person and they noted that they wanted to be able to be into a hobby during the gap year.

> P22: So, I set myself goals for this summer. First I would learn to ride a bike, I would learn to swim, I would go to piano lessons. I did not do any of it. The period could be evaluated in that way. When you ignore studying, there is plenty of time left for such things. I think these are more valuable. Developmental activities for people. But we also lack them.

A considerable number of participants emphasized that 12-year compulsory education life overloads them with the mentality of success comes with studying and passing courses with good grades. To be in that position might make them unaware of their personal competences. Thus, participants wanted to be able to spend time with activities by finding their personal interests and socialization. They clarified that it would be nice to spend time with their family and friends by participating in social and cultural activities, as well.

> P14: If my desired university is ensured, I would spend it (gap year) for myself. During the 12-year education period, you cannot spend much time for yourself because of focusing on the lessons. Since I knew that I would not be able to prepare for the exam in the first year, I reserved the gap year for myself. Again, I

would reserve that one-year period for myself. If there were nearby cities I wanted to travel to, I would go there. If I was able to go to far cities, I would go there. I would spend more time with my friends. I would watch my desired TV series and movies. I would go out more and get fresh air. I would cook my favorite meals. Also, I like things like handicrafts or painting. I used to deal with them. I would definitely take time for myself.

Since all of the participants spend their gap year with exam preparation, a few participants stated that they had some academic gaps regarding the university entrance exam arising from their lack of interest in secondary education lessons. Therefore, they would like to make an academic preparation for the department they will study.

P2: …I'm going to study mechanical engineering. I work on how I can improve my mechanical engineering competencies for a year. What are necessary competences in engineering? I need to learn programming and I need to learn languages and I have a year. I will evaluate the year just like that. I would focus on the topics to finish my school more comfortably.

P18: I am completely devoted to my major. I read the books of my major. I start to develop myself academically. If the university is ensured, I start to study the lessons of that department. I think everyone does it that way. Everybody has an ideal goal. Like our parents ironically said; "if I studied, I would definitely study medicine!". I would definitely start improving myself academically. Let's say, there are live programs about vocational competences, or I would read the books of my department. I was always making things up. I think everyone would do that. I would also include my social life with a more comfortable mentality. Actually, there would be no problem like waking up and studying. It would be nice.

On the other hand, internship opportunities contribute to skill development of youth. After the end of internship activities, young people can proof their skills with provided certificates by the organizations. A few students noted that they would like to participate in Erasmus+ programmes or local internship activities related to their university field during their gap year period.

P23: I would like to do Erasmus study too; I think about it. Traveling relaxes me. I also have foreign friends. We are already talking to improve our language skills. I enjoy translating. If you love something, it is not a problem for you.

P17: My aunt is a nurse. For example, I could say something to her "hey aunt, take me (to the hospital) with you". I would try to teach a little bit about the job before I go (to university). I would like to learn something about my department as an intern, even part-time. I could complete it (gap year) in this way. I would be more social.

Participant 7 who has a weak financial situation underlined that he wanted to earn money by working in this period. Since he has no plan for personal development activities, he highlighted that if he has an opportunity to have a gap year without exam preparation, he would like to start university first otherwise he would like to work to make more money for his living costs.

> P7: …I would find a job. As long as I know me, I am either at school or at work. I don't have much free time. So I have no. What will I do in that year? I'm thinking. I have no idea. Someone else might say; "I can go on vacation somewhere". He may say that he would like to do something in such a place or something. My preference is not like this. Because I am at school in the winter and at work in the summer. I have adapted myself this way. I would continue like this.

Participants expressed that desired gap year activities would be very beneficial for their future career. However, they never thought of doing these activities except to prepare for the exam again and indeed they highlighted that the realization of such a possibility in Turkey is impossible. In terms of participants' statements, the reason is that Turkey's exam-oriented education system and society's misperceived mentality regarding being successful at the examinations is real success.

> P1: …You may take a vacation with your friends or family. It is spent in that way. Nothing so much. There is no such a mentality to go to another country in Turkey's reality.

> R: What is the reason for this?
> P1: The reason is financial. Although people have dreams, there is a fact that high income class people are one step ahead of me. Because we say that there is no capitalism in the country, but there is a high capitalism by the way. We live at the bottom.

> P21: I wish I had such a year. But not. This does not happen in our country. My God, I love my country, but… Are we going to live a comfortable life? Now we cannot think of it either, because we will compulsorily prepare for the exam… This one year could really make sense. It is not important, just a year. Many more years will pass in your life that you will not be aware of. I wish they gave it for 1 year.

Impact of COVID-19 on Gap Year

The closure of educational institutions due to the COVID-19 has deeply affected all kinds of measurement and evaluation systems including university entrance exams. Along with the pandemic, there are main issues that need to be decided by the government

immediately. These precautions are such as; how will the educational transition of students take place, whether the state exams will be held, if so when they will be held, or whether a change will be made on the exam (Demirci Celep, 2020). Candidates had to re-evaluate decisions of their higher education process. Therefore, COVID-19 outbreak unexpectedly changed the plans of young people who took a gap year. Participants stated that the changes made in the university entrance exam due to the pandemic had to change their study plans made during the exam preparation process and this led the participants to make alternative plans. In the YKS 2020, which came to the pandemic period, some subjects were removed from the exam because some students could not get the education of the subjects to be covered in the exam. In fact, the date of the exam was taken back to the same date after being forwarded one month from its normal date. Participant 13 who emphasized the effects of the changes made in the university entrance exam due to the pandemic.

> P13: Now, we had to wear masks in the exam. Do the people next to us have a disease or not? During the exam, all my friends were afraid of him. Likewise, the issues coming back and forth, the exam being thrown forward and back. These have been very effective.

Young people who took a gap year have experienced a number of problems in home quarantines, online education, hygiene measures, socialization and mental health. Half of the participants stated that they had difficulties in managing the exam preparation process from home. They complained about studying at home because of the unusual problems experienced in the process of adapting to the home as a studying environment. They indicated that there are many distractions to limit studying routine such as; dealing with housework, having more places to rest or playing computer games.

> P1: It has affected the last 3 months. We tried to get used to online classes. God save, it's very tough. There's a lot of distractions. I used to work in the library. I could not work at home. That's why it was badly affected.

> P7: Pandemic destroyed all things. When the COVID-19 has happened, the classrooms were closed. We need to work more at home. Of course, when you go home, no matter how hard you want to study, no matter how hard you try, it doesn't work. You cannot. There is also a comfort in you. When there is any housework, they call your name directly. Come give a hand, help us to do this. Therefore, studying was not very productive. It was a bit turbulent for me.

> P9: Spending time at home is rising, but that time is not productive so far. A neat person makes use of it. But a person like me cannot use it. It was always problematic. I started playing computer games.

Due to the fact that physical lessons were canceled, recorded video lessons were offered over television during the pandemic process. Some educational institutions also used existing distance education infrastructures. In addition, teachers started to teach the topics interactively through virtual classrooms on various online platforms. By creating online education platforms, learning resources (lectures, animations, tests, quizzes, various measurement tools, etc.) were uploaded to the platforms, and the students were followed up with the assignments and tasks that are given over the channels free of charge. Therefore, continuity of communication between teachers and students ensured (TEDMEM, 2020). However, some participants expressed that online education creates an unfamiliar environment for them since they have not been trained how to utilize online educational tools before. Since participants were out of school, they joined the online classes that were provided by their private education centers. According to their experiences, they could not get benefits from the provided online education during their gap year period.

> P20: Our private education center has 4-5 offices. We used to have a class with 16 people. Now all of a sudden the classes are with 40 people. We started taking lessons from a teacher who I did not know. I understood nothing because of the fact that only one teacher was speaking and everyone could mute the microphone. The classroom environment that I was used to has changed. Everything changed instantly. Already a month has passed with getting used to it. After that, the content of the exam was not clear for a long time. The exam date has been postponed twice. First of all, we felt comfortable. Okay, so we can work out our missing subjects. While we move slowly, oops! date has been reverted. Okay, it is reverted to the same date, but we were a little more relaxed. Then, the fear of not being able to finish all the exam content etc... Also, the subjects that will bring me a good score and those that I care about the most have been removed from the exam content. This is my bad luck. When I took a gap year, I planned the content. I had worked hard with them to make sure they were okay for the exam. Those subjects were not included in the exam. It was such bad luck.

> P13: It had a very bad impact on both me and all my gap year friends. It affected us for a period of 4 months. We could not go to the private education center for 4 months. We could not conduct the trial exams for 4 months. We did not learn the most important topics face to face. Thanks to our center, we continued our classes online. We performed the lessons, but it did not give the same effect.

Furthermore, it was stated that there was a period when students taking courses from private education institutions felt especially deficient in professional academic guidance.

> P6: When there is no guidance in COVID-19, people are shaken as soon as possible. I have finished the topics. But am I going right through the right way? You do not know. You will go to the exam with your friends. But you don't have friends here. For example, they make online exams in the district. But the real exam will not be online. It will be on paper. You are trying to see the difference among others online. Will you work with paper or work with a computer? That's why I went on paper. Instead of competing with anyone else**.**

Participant 23 who exemplified that constantly using electronic devices in preparation for the exam also affects eye health and she experienced temporary health problems.

> P23: It sucks anyway. After a certain period of time, when I said that my essays and books were finished, I started to constantly take tests and take exam trials on the phone in my second exam. You know, I was starting to see blurry in my eyes. Until I go to bed, I do everything on the phone for a total of 8-9 hours a day. Because you can't find it (trials) easy. You cannot print from the internet. It's a heavy process anyway, very heavy process anyway. While dealing with it, it was very heavy, how can I say... I said you know it just went online. Only on the phone, my own health, my eyes, there is no trouble in my eyes, but ultimately you have a very good eye. While solving something on the computer for 8-9 hours, it inevitably becomes blurry. So it was a little difficult in the pandemic.

While the negative aspects of the pandemic, there have been participants who turned the crisis into an opportunity. 6 participants emphasized that despite quarantine, some participants used the privilege of staying at home to focus more on work and future education plans.

> P16: I did not study for two weeks. I stressed myself out. I wondered if I was a virus. But I said afterwards, you know, everyone will use the virus as an excuse and they won't study. I think this should be turned into an advantage. I have to work or something. Studying at home was even better. I noticed that too. I think I studied more. It worked for me.

> P8: When I stayed at home I tried to improve myself on something. I tried to develop my intellectual knowledge. Because we started staying at home more. I made use of this period of time, instead of wandering around.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this part, the conclusions which have been derived from the Chapter 4 of the study are discussed within the framework of the research questions. Moreover, results from the Chapter 4 are explained with the support of the relevant literature. The discussion was expanded by giving examples related to the study problem. In the recommendations part, suggestions are made for further studies on the research topic by making sociological inferences.

Conclusions

Education is disappointing for young people to make a smooth transition from school to adult life (Tomlinson, 2005). The rate of NEETs, school dropouts and academic burnout are significant concerns for government and educational authorities due to the direct influence on not only the human capital of the country but also young people's mental wellbeing and their anxiety of post-school uncertainty (Wyn, Cuervo, Smith & Woodman, 2010). This situation comes with questions about which activities are worthwhile for the future and how young people could obtain proper hard skills or low skills (Hendarman & Cantner, 2018). Therefore, Snee (2010) states that young people should have individual responsibility and build a personal development map in order to make successful transitions in education.

Transition periods in education have a huge impact on children and youth. Specifically, young people have to follow a few scenarios in order to make the transition from high school to university easily. Also, they choose a number of activities by evaluating their transition process in a more meaningful way. Gap year is one of the most preferred activities for young people who have graduated from high school (Stehlik, 2010). In Turkey, each high school graduate takes a national university entrance exam to proceed with their higher education. When they had their exam results, they changed their mind to take a gap year instead of continuing to higher education. In that process, young people measure their current position before enrolling in a university and develop some strategies to take a gap year. According to the findings of the study, the decision of gap

year has been taken not only by the youth individually but also with the influence of some factors such as family, social environment, socio-economic status, job market and educational policies of the country. Therefore, young people give one or more years of break to continue university so that they would get a better education in the future. Due to the fact that gap year is a flexible time period, gap year people are exposed to criticism from their parents and environment. These comments create social pressure on young people and influence the gap year period (O'Shea, 2014). Young people who could not achieve a sufficient score in the first exam experience the fear of failure during the gap year. Young people who feel this fear and pressure disobey comments from parents, environment, teachers and friends. Thus, family, teachers and the social environment, which are the authority elements for young people, lose their prestige. Even though their families complain, young people tend to consult the internet more often than before in order to find similar stories to them.

Within the statements of the participants, one of the most striking results was that the students could not create sufficient academic background for the university entrance exam in high school period, however, they did not give the necessary attention to their lessons. Thus, they failed the university entrance exam and tried their luck for next year. Besides, families trying to guide students who cannot receive sufficient support during the secondary education period. Parents lead their children to the most secure profession according to their point of views. Here, it is useful to mention the socio-economic background of young people. If the parents have a high level of education and income, the tendency of the candidate to retake the exam is higher than that of a working-class family (Frisanchoa, et. al., 2016). However, retaking shows a 5% increase in learning outcomes and it is possible that retaking the exam may be an advantage for families who care about education. Another advantage of retaking is that it allows the removal of prejudices regarding the quality difference between schools due to the fact that there is a large amount of time in preparation for the new exam without going to school. Moreover, socio-economically disadvantaged candidates who are retaking the exam are more successful when they retake the exam (Frisanchoa, et. al., 2016).

Apparently, young people who are directed to dominant occupational groups tend to choose similar fields in their career goals. This shows that there is a standardization of career preferences of young people. Young people tend to enter high ranking universities in order to obtain one of the leading job fields during the gap year (Hazelkorn, 2013). It shows that gap year is a rerun marathon in order to win well-known and high ranking

universities in Turkey. During the race of enrolling in elite universities, waiting for next year can bring a better result. The gap year provides a useful opportunity for young people to complete their academic deficiencies. Young people aiming for higher-ranked universities can make better academic preparation during the gap year. In addition, lower scores can be obtained due to the pressures experienced during the gap year process or the decrease in study performance. This shows that the gap year period should be planned in detail if the exam is retaken.

Gap year provides a good time for non-formal and informal education opportunities or social activities. However, if young people in Turkey do not choose to go to university after high school graduation, they spend the gap year process by preparing for the exam again. Moreover, female students cannot continue their education due to various reasons and pressure from their parents (Malhotra et. al., (2011). For this reason, the gap year is highly preferred by female students who want to prepare for the exam again in Turkey. Although young people want to participate in activities that will provide them with new skills, this mentality does not exist due to the socio-economic conditions of young people. On the other hand, since the gap year process is financed by families, it has been determined that there are also young people who use this time period in their favor without purpose. Young people, who spend the gap year unproductively, only postpone their higher education by taking a gap year.

Another dilemma is the declining importance given to higher education. Young people expect support in the field of career guidance during the gap year period. The fact that parents have low knowledge about the university entrance exam and universities causes them to not be able to lead their children and consequently enroll their children in private education institutions. Young people who could not receive the expected guidance service in private education institutions expect to work with expert teachers who can get better career support. Moreover, the fact that there are many unemployed people with university degrees (Shipps & Howard, 2013). This perception reduces the importance of higher education in the lens of young people. Thus, young people take all their expenses and prefer to take a gap year for one year. Although there are ones who got higher scores and enrolled in better universities, the number of young people who complete gap year without any change in the exam result. Also, the gap year phenomenon is not limited to only one year, however, there are people who do gap year twice, three or four times to prepare for the exam again. Postponing higher education also affects the ranking of candidates who took the exam for the first time. Although the score is increased, the

ranking of the candidate decreases due to the accumulation of candidates who come from the previous year.

Gap year is preferred by young people to do extracurricular activities, working in a job or studying due to not getting enough score from the university entrance exam. Besides the popularity of gap year, the considerable criterion of making a gap year decision is post-school uncertainty (Martin, 2010). Today's young people face more difficulties in the transition to higher education or adulthood compared to the previous generations. To be able to cope with the issues that are the complex nature of continuously developing technology or adapting skill-oriented and flexible working opportunities, guidance strategies have to be reevaluated for young people (Brook, 2009). Consequently, the gap year is the most productive and sufficient opportunity offered to young people to deal with this ambiguity with a period of one or more years (Martin, 2010). But in the context of Turkey, young people challenge past and future concerns by pressuring the social environment rather than evaluating the convenient gap year opportunity itself. The reason is related to the fact that society perceives success according to the results of the exams. Besides, people only accept some occupational groups for money and prestige by believing elite universities provide more qualifications to students for the future. This is an undeniable dilemma for youth and the proper analogy that could be made is young people are in a position to choose another wrong way at the labyrinth instead of exit.

On the other hand, in a study examining the effects of the gap year experience on autonomy and citizenship conducted by Mouraz and Araujo (2017), the environment (relatives, close friends, funding people of organizing gap year activities) of the young people confirmed that the young people gain new visions at the end of the gap year. After the gap year, young people are more open-minded, have a broader vision, improved their social skills, are able to manage money, and more motivated to higher education (Mouraz & Araujo, 2017). As it can be seen benefits of the gap year, critical thinking about that phenomenon could be useful to understand that the process is not taken for granted for young. It needs to be explored by taking into consideration a particular social context, within the experiences of the young people (Snee, 2010). But the participants do not have such a gap year experience in their transition period. Gap year people in Turkey define themselves as ‘mezun’ in Turkish, which means ‘high school graduate’, but they named the process of gap year as preparing for retaking the university entrance exam. Furthermore, most young people got a higher score compared to their first exam result after the end of the gap year. Despite the fact that it is a positive difference on exam results

of young people at the end of the gap year, they could not reach the necessary score that they need to enroll in high ranking universities of Turkey. However, they are happy not because of going to a better university, yet they are glad to save themselves from going to a low profile university.

In addition, as gap year provides a more flexible period due to the absence of school, has caused young people to focus on their own goals and realize their responsibilities. Thus, the gap year provides a good opportunity for individuals to gain self-autonomy (O'Shea, 2014). Although the young people had activities they wanted to realize during the gap year, they could not fulfill these dreams yet they were not in a strong financial situation, social pressure and lack of information regarding new opportunities. Finally, young people who spend the last months of the gap year period at home due to the Covid-19 restrictions, have tried to turn the crisis into an opportunity by adapting to the situation, even though the pandemic brings the new normal situations they are used to. Those who could not adapt to the new conditions showed lower performance in the exam.

As the design of phenomenology was utilized to decode the main research question, the sub-question of the study which is 'does the increasing number of high school graduates indicate a delay in higher education or the pursuit of a better career?' were discussed based on the in-depth interpretations of the participants. Instead of putting the student at the center of the education, problematic outcomes would be described as a misinterpretation of progressive education and constructivism. It is understood that the educational philosophy of Turkey follows progressivism and social reconstructionism on paper but implement the application of essentialism and perennialism in education process by concentrating to train individuals who write down what the teacher says exactly, memorize the information written in the books, accept whatever he learns true or not. They are also timid, far from originality, disconnected from daily life practices and social relations, and admirers of the West or the East. The philosophy of education has to follow raising children who have a scientific point of view, think independently, are democratic and secular citizens, have social justice awareness, respect differences and are tolerant (Sönmez, 2019).

Recommendations

Today, the decisions of the transition period from high school to university are a turning point in life for young people. Any educator or parents don't want the students to

fall into dilemmas during the education life with a decision of taking a year out. If the process is well managed especially by the young people, teachers and family, it would get more beneficial outcomes at the end of the decision of taking a year out. Some solutions from the literature is such as teachers have to save the children from the over-assessing function of examination and make them introduce with new opportunities to make suitable decisions for higher education (Heath, 2007, p. 95). Another is that every young person has different skills and they need to be guided more sensibly by teachers and also family. A well-planned timeline of a gap year would be useful for improving young people's skills and future careers (Snee, 2010, p. 167). Regarding the adaptation of gap year activities in education, Harvard University, as one of the most prestigious universities in the world, systematically promotes the gap year with the idea that it has a role in bridging high school and university. According to the office of career services announcement of Harvard University supports students' gap year after their admission process is ended. Harvard evaluates the gap year that this time span can be the opportunity to revitalize the young people for academic study, raising their maturity, gaining new experiences and developing their creativity, decision-making skills and awareness of living independently. The announcement promotes that gap year is the opportunity to travel around the world, explore new cultures, volunteer, do internships and some other purposeful experiences (HU, 2017). Although the characterization of gap year address diffirent developmental activities, this phenomenon emerged as a time period used by high school graduates for academic purposes in Turkey. The participants indicated their experience-based suggestions to their peers who feel hesitant whether deciding to have a gap year. Therefore, young people recommend having a gap year under a few circumstances that are listed below.

- People need to have a decent family income during the gap year due to huge expenses of the one-year break before enrolling in a university. The first condition to take a gap year is that the family should cover the expenses unless young people are self-sufficient and have their own income without their family support.
- Also, the candidates have to be ready to encounter possible pressures from parents and social environment. People should be ready both financially and mentally to be faced with unexpected challenges.
- Gap year is an advantageous period due to the previous experience regarding preparing for university entrance exam, managing time and coping with stress.

Furthermore, academic knowledge is definitely increased compared to their 12th-grade graduate competitors. Thus, it is possible to get a higher score on the second attempt of the exam.

- Although the gap year provides opportunities for young people to study the exam more intensely, the lack of management time and having mental struggles prevent them from making use of the flexible and valuable time of gap year.
- As the gap year emerges as a one-year break, participants defined the period as finding their passions. They did not count on the gap year as a waste of time. Participants support the idea that if a student; could not reach the necessary score of the desired department, would like to get a higher score, could not study the whole examination contents, would like to overcome stress for next time, they would take a gap year.
- Participants support the online platform for studying the university entrance exam except the platform that the government provided during the gap year period. If young people have access to the internet and a proper study environment at home, they can easily find YouTube videos that contain contents of the university entrance exam.

However, the participants who do not support the gap year under some conditions.

- Gap year enables stress to Turkish young people due to fear of failure twice. The perception of people about gap year is that if a young person takes a gap year most probably he/she failed at the exam and tries their luck again. To demolish that perception of society is extremely challenging for Turkish youth. However, they have various reasons for retaking the exam apart from the failure.
- Besides, young people could not find somebody to share their feelings and ideas with except with their friends. They could not interpret themselves clearly to family and social environments due to being in a different era compared to their elders. So, they cannot get a reference from their elders regarding their education and career life, as people do not comprehend the contemporary ideas of youth.
- Gap year is challenging for the young people who lack opportunities to access quality education, internet connection, a suitable environment for studying or a supportive environment. Specifically, young people who live in the eastern region

of Turkey have fewer opportunities to promote their educational environment because of the poor socio-economic status of families, illiteracy and lack of attention to education.

- First entrance of the university entrance exam is more advantageous in terms of young people who are fresh graduates and their knowledge about academic lessons. Thus, some young people support the idea of showing their best performance in their first university entrance exam without any further preparation during a gap year. Because they emphasized the remark that gap year people might have stress because of the social pressure. Moreover, young people might have worse exam results after the gap year is over. When these possibilities are taken into attention, participants support the idea that young people should take responsibility to study more during the gap year. Otherwise, gap year for exam preparation might turn into self-deception of young people who have a gap year.
- They suggested that retaking the exam is possible during studying at a university. Also, participants who are not satisfied to take a gap year emphasized that there is an opportunity to pass a better ranked university while studying at a university by using exchange programs. Thus, the gap year is not the only option to retake the university entrance exam.

Young people explained the useful strategies to evaluate their gap year period efficiently. Even though young people evaluate the gap year period with an exam-oriented mentality, this is a misconception in terms of spending their time with valuable activities for personal development. Young people support the idea that gap year should not be perceived just for solving test questions for university entrance exam. Surprisingly, young people who would like to focus on their future dreams digress from their real career goals because of the pressure of sophisticated university entrance exam. Also, they are discouraged due to the constant judgments of their environment regarding choosing the most prestigious occupations rather than following their dreams and career goals. They have difficulties keeping their mental well-being, as well. Although they would like to do many desired activities during the gap year, they are restricted by socio-economic status of family, family income and regulations of the country. Besides, they learn many things during their preparation for the university entrance exam again. They learn to be more productive by studying on their work. They adapt themselves with a scheduled plan which

is prepared individually to reach the score of desired universities. Young people balance their social and academic life during the gap year and most importantly, they question their life course because of learning to manage all troubles such as social pressures, exam-oriented mentality, stress in the way of reaching their dreams.

As it is seen from the quotations, young people have diverse experiences regarding academic performance in school. Before making a gap year decision, each young person evaluates their current situation in education personally or guidance that is taken from the environment. In addition, the expectations and pressures of the family and the environment, and the weakness of social relationships are among the sociological impacts of the preparation of the university entrance examination. Students enter the exam by knowing that their families assist them while studying for the exam and making various concessions in life. The support of the family positively influences the success of young people (Çolak, 2006). Parents should pay attention to their attitudes towards all their children regardless of the children's age or the number of repetitions to enter the university entrance exam during the gap year period. Lots of high school graduates have no aims or any vision regarding career preferences because of no attempts to discover their skills for the future. Young people need to explore their own capabilities by using flexible time period or supportive programs. In recent years, researchers have investigated a variety of approaches to a gap year in many countries. Yet there is no approach to a gap year more systematically except for just studying intensively again for the exam in Turkey. Besides, before taking a gap year, young people should discover their aims to follow through their entire life. In contrast to deciding just looking at their exam results and choosing a university unconsciously, the most important issue is to find alternative ways for shaping their future more consciously.

In the transition period, high school graduates are not enrolled in a university, they are over 18 and they might have the potential to be NEETs (not in education, training and work) or school dropouts. Also, they are challenged with post-school uncertainty since universities do not guarantee the future employability of youth. Thus, thoughtful management and guidance of transition may reduce the level of precariousness and uncertainty. Even though the governments encourage young people to be in educational attainment during the transition to higher education, it should be highlighted that students face challenges to pay high costs in education and also they have a skeptical perspective for future employment. At the same time, one of the contentious issues primarily raised by employers about education is the inconsistency if the education system provides the

right skills for the job market. At a global level, secondary school graduates might withdraw from education by taking irrational gap years due to the climate of uncertainty that is created by the COVID-19 pandemic. An online panel of Hunt Institute (Markell, Taft & Oakley, 2020) was conducted about governing principles of public education policy after COVID-19 by emphasizing building cross-sectoral dialogue among schools, colleges, educational leaders, governors and legislators to recover the students' perceptions of future uncertainty. COVID-19 leads to reevaluating the mercurial status of youth in society from the point of a reconceptualization of future work, career opportunities, employment, mental health and life course management.

The education system of the 21st century expects people to become citizens of the world. Schools train students to gain and adapt to the top hard and soft skills of the 21st-century people. Today's young people have to equip themselves to be intelligent, analytical, and creative thinkers in alignment by developing their moral values in order to contribute to society and help their social environment (O'Shea, 2016). In order to increase the benefits of taking a gap year, students are empowered to give awareness by an advisory teacher, high school administrators and parents. In terms of the lifelong learning approach, the government has to promote gap-year accreditation dependent on experiential learning and provide more opportunities in terms of both activities and guidance for young people (Heath, 2007). Heath (2007) suggests that the gap year's rise is largely the result of motivations by participants to gain an advantage over other applicants in an increasingly competitive marketplace and higher education system. However, her hypothesis does sit well with the responses of the participants of this thesis. Lastly, to develop a full picture of a gap year, further studies will be needed by utilizing the sociology of education discipline to unearth the position of young people at the transition period from secondary education to higher education. The experiences of related target groups from the young people's environment would be included to the further studies in order to understand the broader picture of the transition process of higher education. Besides, qualitative and quantitative data that will be collected from different cities might be useful to comprehend young people's experiences during the gap year in Turkey.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Demographic Information Form

Gap Year Trend as A Sociological Phenomenon of Education

Demographic Information Form

Gender / Age	:
Type of Graduated High School	:
Branch/Study Area	:
School Success	:
Graduation Year	:
City	:
Father’s job	:
Father’s degree	:
Mother’s job	:
Mother’s degree	:
Number of siblings	:
Student sibling(s)	:

APPENDIX 2. Question Form

Gap Year Trend as A Sociological Phenomenon of Education

Question Form

1. Could you please talk about yourself? Which schools did you study at, what kind of student were you?
2. How is your family income and education? What is the profession of your family members?
3. Is there anyone in your family who is studying? How many siblings do you have?
4. When and how did you prepare for the first exam? Did you get support from the school, special education centre or one-to-one tutoring? How long did you spend on preparation?
5. What was the aim of your preparation for the exam? How did you take that decision? What were the views of your family?
6. How do you evaluate yourself on your last year's exam result?
7. What kind of reflections or evaluations did you take from your family and environment regarding your last year's exam result?
8. How did you decide whether to enroll in university or not?
9. How was your friend's situation? Did anyone take a gap year? Who are they? How was your relationship with your friends who are in the same situation as you?
10. What did you do after the first exam? How was your daily life? What did you plan for the next steps?
11. How did you decide to prepare for the exam again, how did you make this decision?
12. How is spending a year without going to school?
13. What were your main expenses during your 1 year, how did you cover them?
14. Right now, how do you evaluate your decision to prepare for the university entrance exam again?
15. What issues have you need support or what were the issues you wanted more support in the preparation process? From whom and how would you like to receive this support?

16. To enter the university exam again, what kind of change do you think about new exam results and university preferences?
17. When you compare yourself to your last year's performance, what has changed in your daily life and study plan?
18. What are the advantages or if any disadvantages of a gap year?
19. Did the COVID-19 term affect you? If yes, how?
20. What would be your advice for candidates who feel hesitant about taking a gap year?
21. How could people spend their gap year period most efficiently?
22. If the university entrance exam is not compulsory and you have been placed in your dream department, how would you like to spend a gap year period before going to university?

APPENDIX 3. Ethics Committee Approval

ANKARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ALT ETİK KURULU
KARAR ÖRNEĞİ

Karar Tarihi : **15/01/2021**
Toplantı Sayısı : **01**
Karar Sayısı : **02**

02-Eğitim Bilimleri Enstitüsü yüksek lisans öğrencisi **Suat Aksu**'nun "Gap Year Trend As A sociological Function of Education (Egirimh Sosl,olojik Bir Fenomeni ola, Mezrura Karnm Modasr)" başlıklı tezi ile ilgili "İnsan Üzerinde Yapılan Klinik Dışı Araştırmalar Başvuru Formu" Etik Kurulumuzca incelendi.

Eğitim Bilimleri Enstitüsü yüksek lisans öğrencisi **Suat Aksu**'nun "Gap Year Trend As A sociological Function of Education (Egirimh Sosl,olojik Bir Fenomeni ola, Mezrura Karnm Modasr)" başlıklı tezi ile ilgili araştırma protokolüne uyulması ve etik onay tarihinden itibaren geçerli olması koşuluyla uygulanmasının etik açıdan uygun olduğuna oybirliği ile karar verildi.

APPENDIX 4. Originality Report

The main part of my thesis titled “Gap Year Trend as a Sociological Phenomenon of Education” (excluding cover pages, preface, abstract, table of contents, abbreviations/symbols, index of tables, index of figures, footness, appendices, curriculum vitae) through “Turnitin Plagiarism Prevention Program” examined and the relevant report was also checked by my supervisor. During the control (1) “Similarities of less than seven words” (2) “References” (3) “Direct Citations” were excluded. The results obtained from the report on similarity control are presented below.

Submission Date	: 02.08.2021
Submission ID	: 1625759506
Page Count	: 84
Word Count	: 35728
Character Count	: 180872
Similarity Rate	: 2%
Defense Date	: 17.08.2021

I hereby declare that I have submitted the original report the Turnitin Plagiarism Prevention Program which shows the above-mentioned results, to the Graduate School of Educational Scicences without making any changes in the results, as an appendix to this statement and that I accept the lagal responsibility that may arise if it is determined that my thesis contains more than 10% similarity rate, I present my respect.

Name and Surname: Suat Aksu

Date: 02.08.2021

Signature:

RESUME

Personal Profile

Name and Surmane : Suat Aksu

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Job Experience:

Position	Place of Work	Date
Project Manager	MB Efekto Grupe	July 2021-Current
Volunteer	Erasmus Student Network of Vytautas Magnus University (ESNVMU)	Oct. 2020-Dec. 2020
Project Manager, Event Coordinator	Projinal Proje Eğitim Danışmanlık Ltd. Sti.	Nov. 2017-Apr. 2019

Academic Information

Education:

Degree	Department/Programme	Institution	Year
Master's Degree	Graduate Schools of Educational Sciences – Sociology of Education	Ankara University	2019 - 2021
Bachelor's Degree	Faculty of Letters – Sociology	Gazi University	2012 - 2016
High School Degree	-	Kuleli Military High School	2008 – 2012

Publications:

Articles

Aksu, S., & Emir, Z.G. (2021). Milli Eğitim Ortaöğretim Hedeflerinin Temel Aldığı Eğitim Felsefesinin İncelenmesi [Investigation of Turkey's National Secondary Education Goals Based on the Trends of Educational Philosophy]. Journal of Research in Education and Society (JRES). Manuscript submitted for publication (July 6, 2021).

Book Chapter

Aksu, S. (2020) Misconceived Gap Year Process Transition of Higher Education: A Video-graphic Study on High School Graduates in Turkey. In C. Cozma (Ed.) Contemporary Issues and Challenges in Humanities, Arts and Higher Education (pp. 187-204) Bucharest, Eikon Publishing.

Paper Presentations

Ersoy, F. & Aksu, S. (2021, July 10). Critical Perspectives of Teacher Alienation in Online Teaching [Paper Presentation]. International Seminar for Emerging Scholars and Activists in Marxism, Social Justice and The Radical Left (ICCE), Athens, Greece.

Aksu, S., & Emir, Z.G. (2020, September 10-13). Milli Eğitim Ortaöğretim Hedeflerinin Temel Aldığı Eğitim Felsefesinin İncelenmesi [Investigation of Turkey's National Secondary Education Goals Based on the Trends of Educational Philosophy]. [Paper Presentation]. VIIth International Educational Research Congress (EJERCongress2020), Ankara, Turkey.

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