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## **An Alternative Learning Environment Outside the Classroom Wall: Association of Seker Portakali for Education & Culture\***

Naciye Aksoy\*\*  
Gazi University, Ankara

Nuri Barış İnce\*\*\*  
Hacettepe University, Ankara

Ülkü Çoban Sural\*\*\*\*  
Gazi University, Ankara

### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to describe the activities of the Association of Seker Portakali for Education and Culture (in Turkish acronym ŞPED, Şeker Portakalı Eğitim ve Kültür Derneği) in Ankara, a local community association that provides critical reading culture and learning experiences, based on the experiences and feelings of children, adults, parents, founder members and volunteer educators. For this purpose, initially the educational policy context in Turkey is briefly addressed. Subsequently, the historical background of the Seker Portakali Educational Association, where the study was conducted, from its foundation up to today is provided. As a case study design data as regards the types, contents, and practice of the educational activities towards the children and adults is collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis. The experiences of those founder member of the association (1), the children (7), adults (7), parents (6), and volunteer educators (2) that participate in the activities were examined and assessed through qualitative research perspective. The findings show that as an example of public pedagogy ŞPED creates alternative learning opportunities for every members of it even with a limited financial and human sources.

**Keywords:** *Critical public pedagogy, Alternative learning environment, Local community*

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\*\* Prof. Dr., Gazi University, Gazi Education Faculty, Ankara, Turkey, E-mail: [naciye@gazi.edu.tr](mailto:naciye@gazi.edu.tr), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3136-647>

\*\*\* Research Assistant, ,Ph.D. student at Hacettepe University, Institute of Educational Sciences Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: [n.barisince@gmail.com](mailto:n.barisince@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4771-9170>

\*\*\*\* Research Assistant, Ph.D. student at Gazi University, Institute of Educational Sciences, Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: [ulkusural@gazi.edu.tr](mailto:ulkusural@gazi.edu.tr), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9766-2443>

## **Introduction**

Historically education has been an apparatus both for the nation states to form and control the society, and for class reproduction (Althusser; 2003; Apple, 2000; Giroux & McLaren, 1989). Still, there have always been criticisms, resistance, reactions, and quests for alternative against the mass school education that protects through its content and operation the interests of the class that is powerful in political, economic, and cultural terms. The struggles throughout the world towards democratisation of education do not always result in a comprehensive success and further not all the attempts and approaches to change can have an equal value. Nevertheless, there are experiences such as Makarenko's Gorki Colony (Aylar, 2014), Neill's Summerhill School (Eren-Deniz, 2014), Sudbury Valley School (Alagöz, 2014), Citizen School in Porto Alegre (Dönder, 2014), The School of Barbiana (Kayahan, 2014), Highlander Folk School (Bayram, 2014) that provided the teachers, parents, students, activists, and local communities, which struggle for democratic education, with hope through their contents and methods. Alternative examples are not known by many people and even by the educators. The reason why educators have not heard or known of alternative experiences is that these experiences are fundamental alternatives to established systems or educational views. Another reason is that such practices have not been adequately promoted (Şimşek, 2000).

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to describe the activities of the Association of Seker Portakali for Education and Culture (ŞPED), as a local community association that provides critical reading culture and learning activities, based on the feelings and experiences of children and adults. Specifically, this study focused on answering the following research questions:

- (1) What feelings and experiences do children have when they compare the school and the association?
- (2) What feelings and experiences do the adult reading group, parents, volunteer educators and founders have about the association?
- (3) What are the limitations and success of the association?

The study also looked at the possibilities of establishing a concrete and practical link between the work of the ŞPED as a field of public pedagogy and the concepts of critical pedagogy. Moreover, the most important task of our time is not only to analyse and oppose existing forms of oppression and inequality, but also to discover the forces that local communities can provide for alternatives that are tailored to their needs and applicable to them. This study may provide contributions in that respect.

## **Educational Policy Context of the Study**

The general purpose and principles of the national education system in Turkey make frequent emphases on such concepts as democracy, equality, democratic education, free and scientific thinking, and secularism (The Basic Law of National Education (METK), 1973). Nevertheless, the legal principles that contain these concepts are contradictory in themselves and it is difficult to say that the concepts have been successfully implemented. For example, while it is emphasized that secularism is essential in education under the principle of secularism, it is also said under the same principle that "Religious culture and moral education is one of the compulsory courses taught in primary schools and high schools and equivalents" (METK, 1973, p.5203). Sunni Islam is taught in the compulsory religion course, and religious and sectarian differences are not taken into consideration (Gözler, 2010; Kap, 2014). Similarly, the education system is not fully inclusive in terms of color, ethnicity, language, (Kaya, 2015), and gender (Sayılan, 2012).

The values of the dominant ideology are imbued in the exam-oriented (İnal, 2008; Keskin, 2012; Aksoy, Akgündüz, Demir, Tunacan, Türk & Uğur, 2017;) rote and teacher-centred system; free and scientific thinking is suppressed (Kuzgun, 2000). Also the personality of the students is shaped by adopting the authority. In such a system, students cannot receive an education that is sensitive to their own culture, language, beliefs, abilities, knowledge, and the topics they want to learn; and physical, mental and social development needs are not met. Families often express increasing dissatisfaction due to the curriculum that is distant to their children's real life, competitive/repressive practices, and unsafe physical conditions. Families with means meet the knowledge and skills as regards their children's interests and needs either by sending them to private schools or through special courses (Aksoy & Eren Deniz, 2018). According to observation and experiences of the researchers it can be stated that most of the families both fail to struggle for creating a democratic educational environment and opportunities for their children even if they do not approve the existing practices in the public schools, and hold on to a psychological submission that it is not possible to change the existing structure. In other words, families perceive inadequacies in schools, oppressive and ideological practices as a destiny and experience learned helplessness. There are also families and educators, such as Student Parent Association [Veli-Der]; Education and Science Workers' Union [Eğitim Sen],) who are first struggling to democratize schools, and if this is not possible, creating alternative learning opportunities and environments that will provide children with democratic experiences outside the school. For example schools established by Association of Another School is Possible (BBOM) can also be seen as one of these alternatives. The vision of this association is as follows: "To establish schools that realize the rights set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, enable children to realize themselves, governed by participatory democracy, respect the ecological balance, and are established and run by initiatives made up of families and volunteers, without making a profit" (BBOM, 2020). Also People's Houses (Halkevleri, 2020) which struggles for right to free education, free medical treatment, right to housing etc- can be seen as an example of public pedagogy.

People's Houses turn its branches, parks and streets into summer schools where children can have fun and learn (Elifoğlu, 2014). Another example is the mathematics village established under the leadership of the Nesin foundation. Its aim is to introduce and endear mathematics to students. Nesin Villages (Village: Mathematics, Art and Philosophy Villages) is a free environment. Nesin Villages are not a suitable environment for young people who cannot keep up with a free environment and need discipline and authority. The village has closed its doors to all kinds of popular culture, vulgarity, ugliness, pollution, and uncontrolled consumption. For example, garbage including cigarette butts is not thrown on the floor, the environment is not polluted, the food taken to the plate is finished, the lights left on are turned off, rude language is not used, no loud spoken, etc. (Nesinköyleri: Talimatname 2020). Aksoy (2014) states that alternative experiences function "to develop our horizons towards an egalitarian and liberating education" (p.26), but it would not be right to see them as examples or models for every context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the study is based on public pedagogy and the fundamental concepts of critical pedagogy, on the grounds that ŞPED as a local community organization provides alternative learning experiences outside the traditional/mainstream education. Although it is defined from different perspectives such as formal, informal, nonformal, incidental, rote learning etc. spanning between life and death, learning is generally the process of acquiring new knowledge, skills, behaviours, values, or changing the existing ones. In other words, the act of learning is not limited to a certain place and time. While learning in schools under the control and guidance of teachers for predetermined purposes is defined as formal learning, learning that takes place in environments other than the foregoing setting (which may also be connected to an institution) through activities based on the principle of voluntary participation in contrast to the compulsory participation (Mok, 2011; Norqvist & Leffler, 2017) is defined as non-formal learning. Learning that takes place at formal educational settings (schools, universities) is defined as institutional learning, while learning at non-institutional environments outside the school is defined as non-institutional learning (Kelly, 2016). Learning outside the formal learning contexts is also a field of study of public pedagogy. Public pedagogy, which examines learning styles, processes, and areas outside the school walls and academic environments (Sandlin, O'Malley, & Burdick, 2011); is an analytical tool at the intersection point of many disciplines including pedagogy, sociology, and cultural studies (Rich & Miah, 2014). According to Jaramillo (2011), public pedagogy is a collective voice, public power, and resistance, linked to broader projects designed to promote democracy in ethnic/racial, economic, and political terms. Public pedagogy is a community-based organization that promotes concrete progress in neighbourhoods, such as health and social services (Dentith & Brady, 1998). Giroux, the most important figure of the concept of popular pedagogy (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010), calls the "production of meaning, social practices, and desires as "public pedagogy" (cited in Mayo, 2002). The most comprehensive definition of public pedagogy is as follows:

It is an activism that is embedded in collective action, not only situated in institutionalized structures, but in multiple spaces, including grassroots organizations, neighbourhood projects, art collectives, and town meetings. Such pedagogy disrupts processes of injustice and creates opportunities for the expression of complex, contesting, and subaltern perspectives (Brady, 2006, p. 58).

Practitioners of public pedagogy are not limited to educators. Practitioners of public pedagogy are various activists and community groups (Brady, 2006), more concretely teachers, journalists, architects, artists, public health workers, and alike, who provide a democratic vision to combat inequality both in public and private institutions, and in everyday practice (Mayo, 2002). Giroux states that interacting with practices that offer alliance possibilities and new forms of solidarity between cultural workers such as artists, writers, journalists and academics, and those engaged in popular pedagogy forms involved in democratic projects is a small but important step in tackling global capitalism (Giroux, 2004). According to him, resistance against dominant structures should be a part of popular pedagogy (Giroux, 2003).

Public pedagogy has various forms, processes, and site of education and learning occur in or outside of formal schooling (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010). Hochtritt, et al. (2017) gives examples of public pedagogical actions and interventions related with social justice education. They explored that art activities such as Fiesta del Senor de Choquekillka, a week-long public celebration in Ollantaytambo, Peru-; Ideas City Festival -that encourages the exchange of ideas on topics such as sustainability, city planning and technology through arts and culture-; the Vlogbrothers-a social media team encouraged viewers to become a community by doing whatever they can to 'end world suck-; CULTURUNNERS - which attempts to dispel negative stereotypes and create positive experiences through cultural conversations in communities-; and sh[OUT] - pedagogy Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex art and culture- are the international examples of public. Besides these examples, detailed examples of public pedagogy can be seen in *Handbook of Public Pedagogy Education and Learning Beyond Schooling* (Sandlin, Shultz and Burdick, 2010).

The application areas and subjects of public pedagogy also intersect with many of Freire's concepts. One of the Freire's concepts is banking model of Education. Freire mentions that there is a certain educational model that reduce the learner to a mere object of knowledge deposit. Freire claims that (2016) in banking model teachers acts as depositors and students act as receptors so the banking concept thereby changes learners into objects. The banking method is a system of oppression and contro (Micheletti, 2010).

According to Freire (2016), in order to get rid of the captivity of all kinds of oppression, it must first be opposed. This is only possible through praxis. "Praxis is an awareness rising action and awareness is praxis" (Vittoria, 2017, p.124). At the heart of Freire's concept of praxis, there lies the transition from criticism to transformative action (Spaaij, Oxford & Jeanes, 2016). Another concept Freire puts forward as regards the empowerment of the individual and her/his liberation from oppression is critical consciousness. He states that critical consciousness is both a reflection and an action for the transformation of social systems and conditions

(Freire, 2016). Freire believed that a critical understanding of poverty, oppression, exploitation, history, economics and alike was a prerequisite for a positive change in people's conditions (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016). Freire states (2016) that education is either a tool used to adapt to the order in which people live, or it should be considered as a tool and a practice of liberation by looking at their conditions in a critical and creative way and focusing on how they participate in transforming their world.

## **Methodology**

### **Design of the Study**

Seker Portakali Education and Culture Association (ŞPED), which, albeit prioritizing the children, provides the local community with learning experiences through a free and critical perspective, has at the same time a unique organizational model. The historical organizational case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) design was chosen in the present study in order to reveal the characteristics, principles, texture of relations, experiences of the beneficiaries, and tracing the Association development. Case study makes it possible to examine a current phenomenon, such as a setting, a subject, a particular event, an institution, a role, a community, or a group, in its real-life context through a detailed and holistic perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). Case studies also provide an opportunity to explore “the sequence of processes leading to social change by focusing on the temporal and spatial dimensions of the phenomenon” (Spaaij, Oxford, & Jeanes, 2016, p. 574). In this study, the transformations seen by children, adults, parents, volunteers and founding members who benefit from the learning activities offered by the association are also revealed.

### **Setting of the Study: ŞPED as a Site of Critical Public Pedagogy**

ŞPED is a local non-governmental organization operating in Ankara, the capital city, at the Batıkent district, which is known for its social democratic social structure and which is also within the service area of social democratic municipalities for a long time. The establishment of ŞPED started by a group of working parents, mostly employed, who did not consider the current education system and individuals and institutions engaged in childcare sufficiently safe, democratic, contemporary, and free the current education system and began discussing of the idea of creating a kindergarten for their own children. As a result of extensive evaluations and exchange of ideas, the idea of opening a kindergarten was abandoned due to its cost and the fact that it wouldn't be sustainable and in 1998, nine co-founders established the Seker Portakali Education Cooperative (ŞPEK). The founding members of ŞPEK have decided firstly to open a children's library, where their children could spend their time outside the school, where their development could be supported in every respect, where children's books would be available, and which would serve on the basis of solidarity and voluntariness. In line with this decision, a library was opened in 2000 when a residential site management allocated free space. The name of the Cooperative as “Şeker

Portakalı” comes from the novel by Brazilian Author Jose Mauro de Vasconcelos titled *My Sweet Orange Tree*. The library is named after Tülay Çakır, one of the nine founding members of the Cooperative, who made great efforts in establishing ŞPEK and died at the birth of her second child. The library activities, which lasted until 2004, were stopped until 2007 due to the rental demand of the site management. Since 2007, the Association has been continuing its activities without paying rent in a part of the Batıkent Community Center building located in another neighborhood of Batıkent. Due to the financial burden of the Cooperative Law, the cooperative (ŞPEK) was closed in 2011 and restructured in 2013 as an association (ŞPED) (Aydoğan, 2016).

In the association, which has a horizontal organizational structure, decisions are made based on the principle of equal right to vote for the members, non-member volunteers, and children. The association is operated completely with the spirit of volunteering and solidarity. In the process from ŞPEK to ŞPED, the core goals of *"carrying out studies supporting the cognitive, physical, linguistic, social and emotional development of children, defending and developing children's rights"* and *"contributing children in becoming individuals but not rote-learners, who think, question, and produce in the existing system"* (Aydoğan, 2016, p.25) were preserved and albeit there have been changes with an aim to focus on the critical reading culture. The association, which does not benefit from private company and European Union funds in order to maintain its organizational independence, raises the necessary funds by collecting and selling waste paper, music concerts, solidarity dinners, cinema and theatre organizations, solidarity networks such as food and beverage sales at festivals, donations, albeit very low, and annual membership fee of 50 Turkish Lira (approximately USD 7.0) (Aydoğan, 2016).

In addition to providing library services for children and adults, the Association also actively carries out the following activities: recycling workshops; autograph sessions and interviews with children's book authors, illustrators, and translators; painting, ceramics, clay and plastic arts workshops; nature workshops-tent camps; entertaining food workshops to encourage boys to enter the kitchen; issuing a monthly newsletter; fairy tale hours; meetings with parents, teachers, and academicians; workshops aimed at recognizing bicycle use and bicycle culture; workshops on words and writing; dance, rhythm and pantomime activities; thought production workshops; and drama workshop in museum. The association also organizes story reading workshops for adults and offers educational programs for parents.

The activity and workshops of the association, which has no paid employees, are carried out with expert volunteers from members of the association and from outside. Since membership is voluntary, the number of participants participating in workshops varies greatly.

### **Participants of the Study**

The association, which started its activities with nine founding members, has 345 registered members, including 32 adult members and 313 children, in 2018. For the purposes of the present study, seven children (7), six parents (6), two volunteer

educators (2), a founding member (1), and seven (7) adults were participated on voluntary basis. All of the participants of the research were members of the association. Identities of the participants have been kept confidential to protect their personal rights. Instead, CP for child participants, P for parents, FM for founding member, E for volunteer educators, AP for adult participants were used and numbered. Personal information about the participants of the study is summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Participants of the Study

<b>Children</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>
CP1	Girl	10	public school-3th grade
CP2	Girl	10	public school -4th grade
CP3	Girl	12	public school -7th.grade
CP4	Boy	15	Private school-9th.grade
CP5	Boy	10	public school -4th.grade
CP6	Girl	6	Private school-preschool
CP7	Boy	10	Private school-4th grade
<b>Parents</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	
P1	Female	Employed	
P2	Female	Retired	
P3	Female	Employed	
P4	Female	Employed	
P5	Female	Employed	
P6	Male	Employed	
<b>Founder member</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	
FM	Female	Retired	
<b>Volunteer Educator/Facilitator</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>	
E1	Male	Employed	
E2	Female	Not employed	
<b>Adults</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Employment Status</b>
AP1	Female	52	Retired
AP2	Female	51	Retired
AP3	Female	60	Retired
AP4	Female	58	Retired
AP5	Male	62	Retired
AP6	Female	42	Not employed
AP7	Male	63	Retired



## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data of the study were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations from camera recordings, taking notes, association documents, and photo shoots. Thus, methodological triangulation was achieved. In order to establish validity multiple data collection methods such as observation, document analysis, interviewing, and survey results are used in methodological triangulation (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011). Two researchers made observations as participants while observing the directors of the association, volunteer educators and children. In the type of observer as participant, the researcher is known by the participants and there is limited interaction between them (Glesne & Peskin, 1992). However, these two researchers had breakfast or talked on various topics while drinking tea with the participants except that of the interview and observation periods. On the other hand, the third researcher who observed the adult reading group became a participant as observer (Glesne, 2011) since the researcher interacted extensively with reading group members. He attended reading workshops, read stories, shared his views on the story with other group members. His being an observer as a participant provided us the opportunity to understand the way adult participants interpret life, interaction between male and female group members, the events they have been affected by, and the past experiences that shaped them.

Volunteer-based semi-structured interviews were recorded in accordance with the consent of the adults themselves and the consent of the children and their parents as well. Group activities were also recorded on video camera with the necessary permissions. The interview questions focused on the participants' feelings and experiences associated with the association. The observations and interviews lasted for four weeks and each took an average of 20-30 minutes. In addition to observations and interviews, the association's official documents, bookshelves, concept encyclopedia created by students, posters on the walls, etc. documents were also examined.

Data from interviews, observations, and document were analysed drawing on the key themes associated with critical pedagogy and public pedagogy as our analytic lens. First of all, the data collected through observations and interviews were transcribed. Then, whole data set were read several times and the observation and interviews transcripts were compared with each other. The researchers independently read the transcripts and created possible codes and categories. The individual analysis of data compared and contrasted to verify the findings. Later, the researchers decided on the themes that would best reflect the categories. Direct quotations are also included under the themes in order to strikingly reflect (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005) the experiences of the participants in the association and their feelings and thoughts about the association.

## **Findings**

As the age and activities of the participants were different, their feelings and experiences towards the association were also varied. Therefore, the findings of the study were organized by the participant groups.

## **Children's Feelings and Experiences**

### ***Enthusiasm and happiness versus banking education***

Children's emotions about the association were examined by comparing their emotions and experiences about the school they attended. These comparisons have also helped to see what different pedagogical practices mean for children and realize the impact of ŞPED. Children expressed their positive feelings about school with short sentences such as "yes I like", "I like it because I have friends", and "I like," while they expressed their negative feelings with longer sentences. This is evident in a student's statements:

I like school, I like to do experiments during the science lesson, but even when the weather is nice, we don't do physical education outside, we receive math and social lessons during the physical education hours. Even if we don't want it, and we have difficulty, we participate in the lesson. For example, when the same subject is discussed for a few weeks, I get bored. Physical education does not decrease our success. ... The teacher wants us to read the books s/he wants, not the books we want. And he makes us prepare its summary. Teachers don't understand our requests. Breaks are too short. Game hours are too short. We take exams in a row. It makes me bored. Unfortunately, I cannot spend time with my family because of the lessons (C1-girl-public school-4th grade).

In explaining their negative feelings towards school, children often emphasized school policies, strict rules and rote and boring educational practices that did not take into account the interests and needs of students. A high school student expressed his feelings about the practices in the school as follows:

To be honest, I don't like school very much. I don't like some lessons or teachers at all. I am not interested in physics, religion, and history. It would be nice if we were taught physics by means of experiments. We learn things by rote for the purpose of exam preparations. Teachers have strict rules. They never let us talk, they always talk. 40 Minutes. Lots of rules. They cannot attract our interest to the lesson. It is better to learn with examples and doing but not by rote (C4-boy-public school-9th grade).

Similarly, another student expressed his feelings about the pressure in the school:

Sometimes there are works that we have to do, but when we don't want to do it, the teacher ignores us, I'm considered absent. Actually, I'm trying to do it, it's hard, but when I couldn't, the teacher ignored me. It makes me unhappy to do things that I'm not interested in and I have difficulty to do. (C5-boy-public school-4th grade)

Children also stated that there was neither play in their school, nor learning with fun and pleasure, and this created tension for them. Even a student attending to the nursery class of a private school, expressed her concerns for starting the primary school, because she thought she wouldn't be able to play games, as follows: *'I do not like to go to school next year, because I will start the 1st grade. Because big*

*schools are bad. We won't be able to play with toys when we go to big schools. And the music lessons in big schools are so long, I don't like it either.'* (C6-girl-private school-preschool). A fourth grader following words both justifies the kindergarten girl's concerns, and reflects longing for playing games: *"Our teacher does not take us out during the physical education lesson, instead we do lessons in the classroom. But we keep an eye out. We want to play games, but we can't. If I were the headmaster, I'd check the weather, cancel the classes if the weather was good. The children would pick and play with the materials they wanted.'* (C1-girl-public school-4th grade)

Contrary to the negative expressions about the oppressive and disciplinary practices of the school the children expressed their feelings and experiences towards ŞPED always in the form of positive sentences, as follows: *"this place is very good, there is no fight; no noise, no chaos, it is ordered and fun"* (C7-boy-private school-4th grade); *"I get very excited when I come here. I'm always moving. I wish I always stayed here."* (C2 – girl-public school-4th grade); *"I always come here willingly, I get excited, I always want to come and stay here. I never get bored here, it is a very nice place.*

The children explained their wish to spend time in the association rather than at school, by the peaceful environment of the association: *"this place is very quiet and peaceful compared to my school"* (C3-girl-public school-7th grade); by learning with fun: *"I learn at school but here I learn with fun. I don't want to crush the school but I prefer to be here"* (C2-girl-public school-4th grade); by the fact that there are more books and children pick and read books of their choice: *"here are the books I'm interested in, it's nice to decide what to read with my own free will, it's good to be able to choose for myself, I have a goal of reading in school, I try to accomplish it"* (C5-boy-public school); by the fact that they acquire new information and skills regarding their areas of interest and daily life: *"I learn a lot during the activities, such as cooking, I cook my dreams in the kitchen. I love cooking very much. I learned how to make a cake. I learned how to use a knife and cooker without help from my elders"* (C1-girl-public school-4th grade); by the understanding and helpful behaviour of volunteer workers: *"I do not experience any confusion with others here. In addition, there are people who are not cocky at all who help us. The staff at the association behave us very good, very helpful. There is less interest at school because there are so many people. I ask a book here and they make lists of pages"* (C7-boy-private school -4th grade).

Children's experiences and feelings about school reveal that school education exactly reflects Freire's definition of banking education (2016). Their feelings and experiences about ŞPED, on the other hand, mostly rely on making their own decisions and learning with fun. Children's emphasis on the behaviour of volunteer educators and employees as opposed to the authoritarian attitude of teachers at their schools suggested that there was a modest and love-based dialogue at the Association.

## **Parents' Feelings and Views**

### ***Volunteerism and hope***

All of the parents, who participated in the study, had positive feelings and opinions about ŞPED. They assessed ŞPED rather in terms of their contribution in their children's habit of reading books and their socialization, contribution of parents' education in themselves, and the selfless behaviours of volunteer workers. The feelings and experiences of a parent about ŞPED are as follows:

The ŞPED brought us nice things. It positively supported us. The fact that there was also an education program for fathers contributed us a lot. It helps us find out whether our actions are correct or not. We feel good here. The volunteers' point of view and devotion make us very happy. When I get here, my hope grows. I can transfer it to my child is very important for us to receive such unpaid, gratuitous labour. I cannot criticize the association. It's pretty established on sacrifice. My feelings are always positive. As a matter of fact, they already work with extraordinary effort, so criticism would be ungrateful (P3Female).

Freire (2014) states that the struggle cannot begin without a minimum hope, and without the struggle hope will lose its direction and turns into despair. He continues that "Hope, as it happens, is so important for our existence, individual and social, that we must take every care not to experience it in a mistaken form, and thereby allow it to slip toward hopelessness and despair. Hopelessness and despair are both the consequence and the cause of inaction or immobilism" (p.10). As Freire points out, hope plays a key role in the sustainability of our social and individual existence. The statements of a parent, who focuses on the behaviours of the workers, which keeps her hope alive, and make her feel peaceful are as follows:

Well, I feel so good about the association. I feel serenity. Volunteers immediately get in touch with my daughter. Someone promptly reads a book. I think it's an emotional satisfaction, I wish I had my own time and I could come here and help. The fact that there is such voluntariness here makes you feel valuable. This place promises hope. It gives my child the culture of reading books. It develops sharing, solidarity, and collective consciousness. I say good people are still unfinished. (P1Female).

Another parent, who thinks that the books are inadequate at his child's school and that the fact that teacher determines the books to be read is wrong, expresses her feelings about the Association as follows:

There's no ordinary book here. The educators here read every book and choose it accordingly. The books here are of very good quality, very good regarding the content, they choose good publications. But there is no such opportunity at my child's school. Their library is very limited and not of good quality. The teacher is also good but the concept of the school is different from here. I want him to choose the book to read. He's not so enthusiastic if I or anyone else chooses it. But it's better when he chooses. It allows him to grow up as a more liberated individual. He makes his own decisions. Here he himself chooses the books (P2Female).

As can be understood from the parents' statements, the number of extracurricular books in schools is insufficient, their quality is not appropriate, and the student cannot freely choose the book to read. The association, on the other hand, offers children the opportunity to read more freely. Parents are particularly affected by the unpaid assistance and altruistic behavior of the employees of the association, keeping their hopes for the future and humanity alive.

## **Founder Member and Volunteer Educators**

### ***Critical consciousness and community empowerment***

Freire mentions that the first step for transformation requires “marginalized individuals developing an awareness of their current situation and the social, political and cultural structures that enforce this” (Spaaij, Oxford & Jeanes, 2016, p.578). There is also such awareness in the background of the establishment of SPED. The motives behind the establishment of SPED included, first of all, that there were certain problems in terms of access to infrastructure, transportation, school and social facilities due to fact that the neighbourhood, where the association was located, was a new settlement area, and that parents living in the neighbourhood concerned that they were not able to support their children's social, cultural and human development. In addition, one of the factors that paved the way for the establishment of the Association was the belief that the educational environment, and aim and conduct thereof, as offered to children in existing schools, failed to allow children the opportunity for they could grow and develop as individuals; for they could grow up as individuals, who loved nature, people, and literacy, and for they could unleash their potential, and that such educational environment was transformed into a monetized tool that imposed the ideologies of political powers, other than caring for the supreme interest of children, and support and develop their areas of interests and skills. Furthermore, parents seeking to create a nursery school where they can volunteer and support their children in order to support their social and cultural development was another factor that laid the groundwork for the establishment of the Association. This was stated by one of the founding members of the Association as follows.

We had children. We couldn't even find the schools to send them. It was very difficult to reach the city, there was no metro, etc. We were trying to raise our children in those conditions. ... Another aspect was that, well, let's send them to schools, but what did they give to our children in schools, what kind of schools those were, did they have a curriculum that would contribute in their growth as individuals; was there an educational system in place, which would ensure that children would become themselves, like nature, like people, and realize their potential, we were questioning those things and concluding that they could not make these gains at school. The concrete indicators of this were a uniform education, a sexist and patriarchal perspective, which did not care about girls, a perspective that did not care about their development and thoughts. ... And we had another requirement. At that time, all our children were very young. In fact, we sought for a confident environment, where we could leave them in the evenings as well. (FM-female).

A founder member and a parent, who contributes in the association both as a trainer, and as a volunteer explains the basic principles and values of the association, i.e. equality, respect for human and nature, the best interests of the child and participation, as follows:

... Our principles and values may be verbally consistent with the principles of National Education. Equality, indeed, we are in a very horizontal communication here. In other words, we have officially the president, the board of directors, but everyone who has a word here is valued, everyone who has labour has the right to speak, whether or not a member. In this sense, of course equality, of course respect for nature, the best interest of children is definitely what we care about most. There could never exist here anything that might harm or hurt children. Respect and participation are among our most important values (E1-female).

The main objectives of the Association include creating free learning environments and accordingly activities are planned in line with the needs and demands of the children and developed by taking games and their daily lives into consideration. Furthermore, activities that would contribute to class transformation and the adoption of gender equality by children are also carried out in the planning of activities in the association.

It is not like an authoritarian attitude, telling children what to learn, or what they must learn but rather like asking children what they have to say, what they want or how they want to express themselves... It is not a process that looks at the child from above and dictates something, but it is a process having fun, learning, or sharing together with children. ... Education is never conducted through the curriculum, but through games and daily life.... We are working towards breaking the prejudices of children. For example, we have a “fun food workshop” event. We encourage the participation of boys here and a female and a male do the workshop together, thus kitchen is not only for women alone. (E2-female).

The activities of the association and the library's contribution to children, adults and parents are explained by the various participants of the association as follows.

It contributes us. It raised me, for example. The first activity of this association was the parents' school and I had participated. I was having trouble communicating with my son. At that time that workshop was held. I felt so good there. It was good for me to be together with people like me, it made me different and paved the way for I participate in the process, and I started thinking about what we could do for other people. It also contributes to parents. Contributes to growing up as a parent, finding ways to connect with the child, as well as spiritual growth by means of meeting with different worlds of meaning. ... We also hold story workshops for adults. I think it offers many people the opportunity to get to know and understand themselves better and to get closer to literature (FM-female).

As stated during the interviews, the association has undergone a growth and transformation process since its establishment in nearly 21 years. This transformation process has also led to a transformation and development process in all individuals involved in association activities.

... Let's call it a growth process, a transformation process... Today we have approximately 300 children members. They come and take advantage of this place regularly. There has been an increase in the number of members. First of all, it made a great contribution to our volunteer friends, who worked here. There emerged authors among us. Strengthening our relations with literature. It has made a great contribution to our differentiation, growth, and maturation. We can actually think of it as a praxis. ... I call this place my heaven, for example (FM-female).

The trainers taking part in the activities of the Association carry out their activities in accordance with the philosophy of the Association and based entirely on the principle of voluntarism and take into account the views of all participants in the planning of training activities. These situations are presented below by the statements of both the founding member and a volunteer instructor:

Mostly instructors are predisposed to our philosophy. We share our thoughts before we hold the workshop. (E1-male)

## **Adult Participants**

### ***Disrupting the culture of silence***

Although the participants of the reading group differed in terms of demographic characteristics, it can be said that the objectives of the activities in which they are involved are in common. There is a community of individuals coming together in order to be able to see that the participants have different perspectives and ensure socialization as a group as regards the subject matter of a text being read. The findings obtained from the interview data regarding the purpose of participation of individuals in the adults reading group were as follows:

I wonder what other people have made out of a text being read, whether we have anything to learn from each other or whether there are different ideas. (AP5-male)

It is also important for me to read together and see different ideas. (AP1-female)

I meet with new stories." I meet new writers. There is also the social energy that my friends in the story group give me. (AP7-male)

The more I read, the more my horizon develops. My psychology is also improving. I acquire information about various issues.(AP-3-female)

The reading group participants, who are retired after they worked in various occupations of the worker class, are the members of the oppressed class within the context of *oppressors-oppressed duality* (Freire, 2016). It will not be wrong to talk about the existence of a social perception regarding the retired citizens in our country, which provides completion of their lives in a quiet corner by pulling their hands off from the problems of daily life. Therefore, this perception may lead to the

continuation of the economic difficulties faced by the people living in retirement, as well as their cultural oppression. However, the participants, who aim to develop by taking advantage of different perspectives, come together in the reading group activities and take a cultural action towards the freedom of their consciousness (Mayo, 2012). They disrupt the culture of silence (Vittoria, 2017), in which individuals have no right to say their own words and make their voices heard, but the voices of groups dominating social life are imposed and their instructions are followed.

### ***Overcoming the fear for freedom***

The adult participants can see different perspectives of individuals by reading together with the group instead of doing individual reading and they get a sense of social relaxation. In particular, it was observed that different perspectives emerged through discussions on gender and class:

... Sometimes we go off the agenda, it is also a useful to speak the truths of Turkey. On the one hand because we talk about those, on the other hand stress relief, on the one hand psychotherapy, on the other hand, we're angry, having watched the news, someone says something and then we all laugh. So, it's good in that way. ... We hang out here in the meantime, we make a joke, we drink a tea, so it provides comfort. ... (AP5-male)

... I like the tolerance, the good reading, the story of the friends. I never read books when I was little. I couldn't read it, to tell the truth. I attended school at my village. I was graduated from the primary school. I got my secondary school diploma remotely. I don't have much to say about culture. But here I became very rich by reading, by reading of my friends. (AP3-female)

We also get the ideas of the gentlemen. We read it to ourselves, but the gentlemen adopt different perspectives. ... When we take a different view, our perspective extends out. ... Because you think. Otherwise, you read, you pass, you can forget. You don't forget it here. It's permanent. ... (AP4-female)

Now we are from different occupations. He knows what I don't. When you get a different response from everyone, you say, "Oh, I never thought of it like that." ... You also know your own people. What he thinks, how he looks, his point of view. As regards sexuality, there were all women especially when I came here. I even said racy, let's not read it, I said pass it. The woman took it, read it comfortably, I was nervous, what would I do while such passages are read. I said I'm not going to comment. I didn't comment, something was read. They read what they read, it was over, everyone commented, I did not talk. When I was asked, what I was thinking, I did something. We never looked at it that way. (He means group members.) So, I showed a different perspective. ... It's like brain training. (AP5-male)

Although the participants of the group included those such as AP5 and AP7 who were retired from teaching profession and therefore more active in terms of cognitive skills than the other participants of the group, this situation did not lead to a notion authority that would cause pressure on participants like AP3. On the contrary, AP3 has the opportunity to express her thoughts within the group and



although it is difficult to understand the text read from time to time, he is understood. AP3, who retired as a working-class employee with a low level of formal education, does not consider herself sufficient in terms of cultural capital. However, this does not lead to *fear of freedom* (Vittoria, 2017), which would prevent her from understanding the reasons of her circumstances, recognizing her limits and seeking ways to overcome them. On the contrary, she shows the will to participate in the activities of the community by taking responsibility for the awareness process. On the other hand, participants such as AP5 and AP7 who retired from the teaching profession as a white-collar employee of the working class, does not act by dividing the participants of the group into two groups of "those raising awareness" and "those, whose awareness is being raised", as Freire puts it, or as "educated people" and "uneducated people" (Vittoria, 2017) as a result of the banker education model (Freire, 2016) owned by the dominant education approach. Even though they are at different levels of learning, they do not see themselves as the absolute owners of knowledge and all participants think critically about social reality.

### ***Praxis***

The short stories that the Adult Literary Society deals with in reading activities can be composed of social problems such as the exploitation relations between the employee and the employer, the effects of distorted urbanization on human life, discrimination caused by differences in ethnic origin, as well as more individual issues such as love, marriage and sexual preferences. In the cross-section of the observation data given below, there is an example of how the participants of the reading group are able to express their opinions, on Iron Age (*Demir Çağı*), a story from Metal Lives (*Metal Hayatlar*) book authored by Berna Durmaz. The Iron Age short story describes the heavy working conditions and exploitation of workers through a factory worker in the metal industry. Through this short story, the message is given that if labour is organized, it will be in a strong position in the struggle between labour and capital.

That man is even alienated from oneself. (AP6-female)

A decontextualized person. ... For example, those who work in a jeans factory, for example, inhaling the metal dye all the time, they get lung cancer or liver. People are slowly getting sick from them. Of course, at the end there is no cure, unfortunately. (AP2 –female)

...labour is sacred, you will know the right of labour, but none of it happens without being organized. Organization is a must here. Everywhere. May 1, one million people participate, women's rights one million, two million, five million people participate. ... It is essential to be organized everywhere. You get your rights when you're organized, laws are regulated as well. Things you want will come out. I read a nice article on May 1st. In short, it says: If there were no labour, if there were no workers, it would be useless that the boss had money as much as the world. Nothing is worth if the worker does not work, does not produce. Who does it, labourers like us. But we are not aware of it, we are not aware of that organized power... (AP5-male)

In the discussion of a text about the relations of oppression, exploitation and oppression of the working-class members in capitalist production relations, it is expressed that the workers become alienated to themselves by becoming an extension of technology and even in some professions the exploitation reaches the wild dimensions and the workers are brought to a point where they cannot reproduce themselves biologically. While the dialogue between the participants continued with the disclosure of the existing oppression-oppressed relations, AP5 draws attention to the labour-capital contradiction and emphasizes that the labour of the worker is at a key point in the production relations. In the dialogue, here, AP5 is aware of the contradiction between labour and capital within the oppressor-oppressed relationship. And he thinks that the way to overcome this contradiction is through concrete action of emancipation, that labour must be organized. Confronting the conditions and contradictions of the oppressed situation helps him understand the need to take action (Vittoria, 2017). Therefore, AP5 emphasizes that praxis (Freire, 2016) as the dialectical association of thinking and action is necessary for the transformation of existing situations.

### ***Productive issues and dialogue***

It was observed that some of the important contributions of the reading group to the participants and some of the changes taking place in them are to learn to listen to them, to understand what they are saying and to develop their thinking skills. It can be concluded that the development of the participants' listening skills also allows individuals with different perspectives to express their opinions. It can be said that the reading group activities of the group contributes to social skills such as increased self-confidence, motivation provided by the energy of the group motivation, and enjoying discussion as well as such cognitive skills as questioning and thinking.

We tried to understand it according to the environment here. We try to interpret what we read in our minds and give feedback according to it. That's its contribution. It makes you think. ...Your self-confidence improves here. You're more comfortable in talking in public. You can express yourself more easily. (AP4-female)

We weren't listening in the neighbourhood. He's talking, we were trying to interrupt him. But we stop talking while YK6 speaks. I wonder what the other party is trying to tell us. That's what we learned here. (AP3-female)

... I saw that there was a different reading world and there was a writer world. I learned to respect the group, for instance. I developed respect for the group more towards friends. ... There are a lot of places I hang out daily. There's more people out there, mostly male. But they do not have the energy, morale, motivation of the group here. They don't do anything but talk. I don't like it. I am not good with it, but reading activity is better. Different thoughts, different shares. ... Good, it has changed, improved my horizons a little more for a few weeks now. (AP7-male)

In the societies formed by the neoliberal form of today's capitalism, individuals become harmlessly criticize the negative things in the society and fail to take an

action against them, and realizing that they cannot interfere with reality they are alienated from the society in which they live (Vittoria, 2017). Contrary to AP7's criticism of inertia for his own group of people, people in the Adult Literature Community do not come together in an inertial manner with only abstract criticisms of social life. Acting on literary works, they exchange ideas on human and natural life issues and conduct interviews with the authors they read and take action to deepen their thinking worlds. Instead of being sentenced to cultural policies and practices that dominate the social life and aim to sterilize the consciousness of the oppressed, they have taken steps towards praxis by carrying out literature studies.

The participants of the reading group experience the dialogue process as a practice of liberating their consciousness by discussing productive issues such as social class, gender and race. This dialogue between participants takes on universal issues from global to private, including ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, challenges, and concrete expressions of barriers to full humanization (Freire, 2016). Cultural action based on dialogue involving productive issues involves mutual respect and acceptance of conflicts, apart from mutual interest; it enables individuals to question the realities and beliefs they have acquired over time and thus overcome their fear of alienation and freedom and regain their self-respect (Vittoria, 2017). The development of AP4's self-confidence in the community, AP3's ability to listen without imposing her own word, and AP6's more questioning point of view while reading can be interpreted that the members of the group began to consider dialogue an existential necessity and a confrontation between people to name the world (Freire, 2016). It can be said that the dialogue-based environment created by the Adult Literary Society through the reading group serves a struggle for emancipation in order to revive this power at a time when the power of transforming existing situations is severely disrupted.

### **Limitations and Success of ŞPED**

All participants are proud and delighted that there survives an association, which hosts people working with a sense of social solidarity without expecting any financial compensation. The participants mentioned that there were problems such as the lack of funding and the physical environment in which the activities of the association took place and the lack of sufficient volunteers to take responsibility in the activities of the association. Child participants, like adults, stated that there were limitations in terms of expanding the space, buying more books, and postponing activities in case voluntary trainers could not attend.

In addition to enabling children to access quality works thanks to the library and having entertaining workshop activities with children, ŞPED holds writing workshops and reading group sessions with adults. The problems experienced in the association could be solved on the basis of mutual understanding, thanks to the individuals, who show their best efforts based on a sense of solidarity.

The obstacles encountered in achieving the objectives of the Association include the individualization as introduced by capitalism in the present era and the efforts of the people to gain a benefit from every work they do, therefore, they are not able to realize the activities carried out in the association on the basis of

voluntariness, and as a result of this situation, they happen to question those showing a great effort here. A problem that challenges the volunteers, who work for the association, is the fact that the beneficiaries of the activities of the association do not return the books they have picked, especially having sloppy behaviours in selecting and receiving books. As a matter of fact, the lack of sufficient number of volunteers carrying out the work and functioning of the association leads to more challenging processes. In addition, the physical conditions of the association are another issue that causes difficulties in the realization of the intended activities. All of these limitations are clearly stated in the following statements:

Obviously, we face obstacles. Day by day we see that people become more individualized, as we can observe it from mothers and children attending here. They have a hard time understanding this thing. They find it difficult to understand that we are doing this voluntarily, and they question us. We have such an obstacle in the first place. Those who don't want to understand this may come and take the books, but not return them back. We may not be able to ensure returning most of our books. You might need to get it again. And we need more volunteers. We need new energies ... We have physical constraints. We have not yet created an environment in which we can conduct our activities in a comfortable way, despite our efforts. Because we are hindered by the financial aspect of the work. To construct a building somewhere... Our dream is something like this. We're thinking of a library. In the library, the books are on separate shelves suitable for the size of the children, tables, chairs, colourful, reflecting the energy of the children, a warm atmosphere, with many workshops being held. We want to get musical instruments in a room. If the child wants to make music, s/he may go there and deal with her/himself. Let the teacher be our friend, but also let her/him contribute to the children, when her/his support is solicited. On the one hand, we get clay in a room, and if the child wants, he can sit there without our workshop organization and deal with the clay. We want to put the broken toys on one side. Anyone can come and do repairs there. Let them try to produce their own toys. We want to have a playground on the one hand, with all the units that provide a free learning environment, but the limitations here are the big obstacles in our minds (FM-female).

People are confronted with "*boundary situations*" (Freire, 2016) that limit themselves during their relationship with the world. The metaphor of the boundary state supports recognizing the state of being at a border and being aware of the consequences of accepting the unapproved-rejected helplessness, being oppressed and other negative aspects, as well as critical awareness by thinking about the possibility of crossing the border (Aksoy, 2019, p. 88,). Therefore, it is not the boundary situations in itself and for itself that create an atmosphere of despair, but rather the ways in which they are perceived by human beings at a particular historical moment: whether they are seen merely a drag or perceived as insurmountable obstacles (Freire, 2016, p. 91). When people realize that the boundary situations they face create barriers to their liberation, they can respond to them by defiance. These are what Vieira Pinto calls "*boundary actions*" to deny and transcend rather than passively accepting what is "given" (in Freire, 2016, p. 91). Once those, whose right to exist was denied by boundary situations, begin to comprehend this situation not as between existence and nothingness, but between

existence and being more human, they orient their increasingly critical actions to the *untested possibility* associated with this understanding (Freire, 2016, p. 94).

## **Conclusion**

According to Freire, every effort to challenge and reshape the sovereign requires constant commitment of educators. Significant changes do not take place one-off or from top to down but require constant effort and living in solidarity with the oppressed (Spaaij, Oxford, & Jeanes, 2016). Ensuring the transformation of social structures towards a more democratic way is possible through large-scale and participatory struggles. However, this does not mean devaluation of small-scale democratic efforts and changes. It is possible to see the traces of Freire's understanding of education of the public pedagogy throughout the 21-year-period of ŞPED, which works for democracy for a small local community. It has been seen that a local organization, albeit on a small scale, contributed to solidarity, empowerment, devotion, love-based dialogue, humility, critical consciousness and praxis, transformation, to free the local community from learned helplessness and to raise awareness of democracy.

Towards the end of the 90s, a group of parents confronted the *boundary situations* posed by the existing education system, which they thought had obstacles to their children's ability to develop their creativity and to think freely. This confrontation brought about the establishment of Tülay Çakır Children's Library of Seker Portakali Education and Culture Association. In addition, they challenged the boundary situations they experienced by carrying out *boundary actions* with activities such as workshops, interviews and reading group activities that took place in the last twenty years. Many years ago, these parents turned their critical thoughts about the current education system into action, realizing an *untested opportunity*. Today, hundreds of children meet with qualified children's books. By acting on concrete, historical reality, boundary situations can be overcome and as reality is transformed, new boundary situations will emerge and they will require new boundary actions (Freire, 2016). Therefore, to say that the existence of the problems that the association is experiencing today in terms of physical environment, financing and voluntary labour provides new untested possibilities, means that a non-dreamer utopia (Mayo, 2012) continues.

Based on the common experience of beneficiaries, it can be said that the ŞPED has the potential for an alternative learning area to empower local people. In accordance with the definition of public pedagogy (Brady, 2006) learning activities in the ŞPED are secondary to both individual, and collective identity formation, common voices against injustices, or strengthening social change. However, through its activities and services for children and adults, ŞPED makes significant contributions to the development of cultural capital, acquisition of critical reading awareness, and social empowerment and solidarity in the local community. The fact that all services and educational activities of the Association are provided free of charge or at very low rates can be seen as a small but important step in the struggle against global capitalism, as Giroux (2004) states.

ŞPED is one of the unique examples of this struggle like Makarenko's Gorki Colony, Neill's Summerhill School, Sudbury Valley School, Citizen School in Porto Alegre, The School of Barbiana, Highlander Folk School, People's Houses, Nesin Villages, Another School is Possible. The story of this association, that was established 21 years ago by a group of parents with an aim to meet the unmet interests and needs of their children within school boundaries and to provide them with an environment, where they can learn "unconditional love and free thought through experiences, is promising in terms of raising happy individuals and building democratic society order. This study aims to introduce the alternative learning opportunities offered by ŞPED, which is the only example of its kind and original, to other families and educators, who experience learned helplessness in Turkey; and therefore, reinforce the belief and power that school is not the only place for learning, and that the creation of democratic-alternative learning environments for children and for parents outside of school is not an utopia, but it exists now.

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### **About the Authors**

**Naciye Aksoy** is a professor in the Department of Primary Education at the Gazi University Gazi Education Faculty (Ankara/Turkey) where she has been a faculty member since 1991. Her research interests lie in the area of politics of education, primary school education, child rights, critical pedagogy and qualitative research.

**Nuri Barış İnce** is a research assistant in the Institute of Educational Sciences at the Hacettepe University (Ankara/Turkey). He continues his doctoral studies in the Department of Primary Education at the Hacettepe University. He is interested in critical pedagogy, alternative education, critical literacy and children's literature.

**Ülkü Çoban Sural** is a research assistant at Gazi University Graduate School of Educational Sciences (Ankara/Turkey). She has a MA degree in the Department of Primary Education and also continues her doctoral studies at the same university and the same department. Her research deals with children rights, gender and education, mathematics education, reading comprehension, and literacy skills.

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