

# Factors influencing high school preferences of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates

Mahmut Zengin\* & Fatih Man

Prof. Dr., Sakarya University, Faculty of Theology, Sakarya/Türkiye, zengin@sakarya.edu.tr, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9042-7379>, <https://ror.org/04ttnw109>

MA, Sakarya University, Institute of Social Sciences, Sakarya, Türkiye, fatihman@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8319-8117>, <https://ror.org/04ttnw109>

\* Corresponding Author

**Abstract:** Established under the Law on the Unification of Education enacted on March 3, 1924, Imam Hatip Schools initially began providing education at the lower secondary level in 29 provinces. However, they were officially closed in 1930 and completely ceased functioning by 1932. Reopened in 1951 as four-year lower secondary schools, high sections were added in 1954. With the introduction of “uninterrupted eight-year compulsory education” in the 1997–1998 academic year, the lower secondary sections were once again closed. Later, the “4+4+4 education system” implemented in 2012 reestablished lower secondary sections. This reform separated the lower secondary and high levels into independent institutions, thereby diversifying the high school preferences of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates. The aim of this study is to examine the factors influencing the high school preferences of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates. The research was conducted with 729 Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates enrolled in a total of 14 schools in Sakarya province during the 2022–2023 academic year, including 4 Imam Hatip High Schools and 10 other types of high schools. Designed according to a quantitative survey model, the study collected data through questionnaires and analyzed them using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests. Findings indicate that family influence is the primary factor affecting students’ choice of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School after primary school. While family guidance played a decisive role among students who preferred Imam Hatip High School, those who opted for other types of high schools tended to do so due to concerns about vocational (religious) courses. Furthermore, the majority of students reported that if they had the opportunity to choose again, their likelihood of selecting Imam Hatip High Schools would be low. This tendency appears to be shaped particularly by students’ career plans and their negative perceptions of vocational religious courses.

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## Introduction

Established under the Law on the Unification of Education enacted on March 3, 1924, Imam Hatip Schools began operating as educational institutions where religious and modern sciences were taught together. Throughout their history, these schools have been shaped by various political and ideological influences—both positive and negative—and have continued to exist to the present day (Koyuncu, 2023). In the early years following their establishment, the number of these schools gradually declined due to the

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prevailing political policies and they were eventually closed in 1930 (Ünsür, 1995, pp. 87–88). Imam Hatip Schools resumed their educational activities in the 1951–1952 academic year as four-year lower secondary schools (Dinçer, 1974, p. 65), and were later expanded with the addition of an high school level in 1954–1955 (Sakaoğlu, 1992, p. 118). Until 1973, these institutions functioned as vocational schools. However, under Article 32 of the Basic Law of National Education (Law No. 1739), they were granted the status of general high schools and began to be officially referred to as Imam Hatip High Schools (*İmam Hatip Lisesi*) (Öcal, 2015, pp. 83–85). Up until the 1997–1998 academic year, Imam Hatip Schools operated as institutions comprising a three-year lower secondary section and a four-year high section. The introduction of “uninterrupted eight-year compulsory education” in that year led to the closure of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools (Öcal, 2015, pp. 98–99). In 1998, the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and the Student Selection and Placement Center (ÖSYM) introduced a change in the university entrance system, applying a coefficient of 0.5 to the Secondary Education Achievement Score (OBP) of general high school graduates, and 0.2 for vocational high school graduates. This policy placed Imam Hatip and other vocational school graduates at a disadvantage of approximately 25 points (Doğan & Yuret, 2015, pp. 199–200), and in 2002, this coefficient difference was increased to about 50 points (Öcal, 2015, p. 298). As a result of both the closure of the lower secondary sections and the coefficient regulation, Imam Hatip Schools experienced a significant decline in student enrollment.

In 2010, the Ministry of National Education abolished the “field specialization” practice in high schools, and in 2011 decided to calculate the Secondary Education Achievement Scores (OBP) of all students using a uniform coefficient of 0.12, thereby ending both the field and coefficient regulations. With the introduction of the 4+4+4 compulsory education system in 2012, Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools (*İmam Hatip Ortaokulu* in Turkish) were reestablished. According to 2023–2024 academic year statistics, a total of 3,404 Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools are operating in Turkey, with 691,422 students enrolled. This figure corresponds to approximately 13.39% of all lower secondary school students (excluding open education) (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2025). In comparison, during the 1996–1997 academic year, the proportion of students attending Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools was 12.1% (Aşlamacı, 2024, p. 37).

In the 2023–2024 academic year, a total of 446,190 students were enrolled in Imam Hatip High Schools (*İmam Hatip Lisesi* in Turkish) across Türkiye. This figure represents approximately 9.45% of all high school students (excluding open education) (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2025). Although this proportion had risen to 15.41% in the 2015–2016 academic year, it has since shown a downward trend (Aşlamacı, 2024, p. 62). In the 1996–1997 academic year, the proportion of Imam Hatip High School students among all high school students was recorded as 8.98% (Aşlamacı, 2024, p. 42). The total number of students enrolled in both Imam Hatip Lower Secondary and High in the 2023–2024 academic year was 1,137,612. During the same period, the total number of lower and high school students in Türkiye (excluding open education) was 9,881,675 (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2025). Based on these data, the overall proportion of students attending Imam Hatip Schools nationwide is 11.51%. In the province of Sakarya, 9,702 students were enrolled in 48 Imam Hatip Lower Secondary and 5,240 students in 24 Imam Hatip High Schools in the 2023–2024 academic year, amounting to a total of 14,942 students. Out of the 114,161 lower and high school students in Sakarya, the share of Imam Hatip students was calculated as 13.08% (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2025). Considering the public claims suggesting that the number of Imam Hatip schools and students has been steadily increasing (Çepni, n.d.), these statistics indicate that there may be exaggerated perceptions regarding this issue in public discourse.

Imam Hatip Schools constitute one of the most frequently researched topics in Türkiye (Aşlamacı & Kaymakcan, 2017; Öcal, 2007; Ozgur, 2012; Zengin & Hendek, 2023), with numerous studies examining various aspects such as curricula, students, teachers, and parents. Among these, several studies are directly related to the present research. Tüysüz et al. (2023) conducted a qualitative study with 20 Imam Hatip Lower Secondary students in the Kartal district of Istanbul, exploring the factors influencing their high preferences. Similarly, Aslan (2022) investigated the reasons why students who completed their lower secondary education in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools chose not to continue in Imam Hatip High Schools, based

on field research involving 350 students and 30 parents in the city center of Karaman. Aşlamacı (2017c) conducted a nationwide field study with 3,738 Imam Hatip Lower Secondary students, while Ünaldı (2019) examined the same issue with 459 students in Erzincan, both focusing on the reasons behind students' choice of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools. Kara (2016) explored the reasons for students' enrollment in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools in Konya based on parental perspectives. In another comprehensive study, Aşlamacı (2017b) analyzed the factors influencing Imam Hatip High students' school preferences. Likewise, Çınar (2018) investigated Imam Hatip High students' expectations of their schools in Isparta, including findings related to their school choice. Öztürk (2023), in a large-scale study involving 6,779 students across Türkiye, and Erikoğlu (2019), in a study conducted in Istanbul, both explored the reasons behind Imam Hatip High students' school preferences. Zengin and Karaman (2020), through a nationwide field study with 4,802 students, analyzed students' reasons for preferring project-based Imam Hatip High Schools and their vocational orientations, while Özdemir and Karateke (2018) examined similar factors among students in Elazığ. Sarı (2019) explored the expectations of students and parents from Imam Hatip High Schools in Pendik, Istanbul, providing additional insights into students' school preferences. Unlike the previous studies in the literature, the present research analyzes the reasons behind the preferences of two distinct groups—students who completed their lower secondary education in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools and continued either in Imam Hatip High Schools or in other types of high schools. In this respect, the study offers a broader perspective by examining the factors influencing both groups' decisions regarding Imam Hatip High Schools.

Accordingly, the main purpose of this research is to examine the factors influencing the high school preferences of students who graduated from Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools. This purpose was analyzed within the framework of the following sub-questions:

1. What are the factors influencing students' decisions to enroll in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools?
2. What are the factors influencing students' preferences for Imam Hatip High Schools or other types of high schools after completing Imam Hatip Lower Secondary education?
3. What are students' opinions regarding their likelihood of choosing Imam Hatip High Schools if they were given the opportunity to make their school choice again?

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Research Model

This study was designed according to the quantitative survey model. The survey model aims to describe the phenomenon, individual, or object of interest as it exists within its natural conditions, without attempting to manipulate or influence it. It seeks to identify participants' characteristics such as opinions, interests, and attitudes (Neuman & Özge, 2008, p. 400). In this context, a questionnaire was administered to gather students' opinions on the subject.

### 1.2. Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of all high school students in the province of Sakarya, while the sample includes 729 students from different types of high schools located in three central districts of Sakarya (Adapazarı, Erenler, and Serdivan) during the second semester of the 2022–2023 academic year. The types of schools and the number of participating students are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** *Types of Schools and Number of Students Included in the Study*

School Types		Number of Schools	N	%
<b>Imam Hatip High Schools</b>	Anatolian Imam Hatip High School	2	161	22,1
	Project-Based Anatolian Imam Hatip High School	2	205	28,1
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>50,2</b>
<b>Other High School Types</b>	Anatolian High School	4	208	28,5
	Anatolian High School (Central Exam Placement – LGS)	2	54	7,4
	Science High School	2	53	7,3
	Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School	2	48	6,6
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>49,8</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>729</b>	<b>100</b>

Research data were collected from 14 schools representing different types of high schools. In total, 729 students who had completed their lower secondary education in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools and subsequently enrolled in various high schools were reached. Among them, 366 students (50.2%) were attending Imam Hatip High Schools, while 363 students (49.8%) were studying in other types of high schools. In Sakarya's central districts, there are ten Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools, five for girls and five for boys. To ensure a sample size comparable to that of students from other high school types, four of these schools—two girls' and two boys' Imam Hatip High Schools—were selected. Two of these schools admit students through the central exam placement (LGS), while the other two accept students based on residential address. In addition, ten schools representing other types of high schools were included in the study: four Anatolian High Schools, two Science High Schools, two Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools, and two Anatolian High Schools admitting students through the LGS exam. The selection of these schools was based on the distribution of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary graduates across different high school types. Fine Arts High Schools, Sports High Schools, and Private Schools were excluded due to the insufficient number of Imam Hatip graduates enrolled in these institutions.

**Table 2.** *Distribution of Students by Gender and Grade Level*

Gender and Grade Level		Imam Hatip High Schools		Other High Schools		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Gender</b>	Female	191	52,2	214	59	405	55,6
	Male	175	47,8	149	41	324	44,4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>729</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Grade Level</b>	9th Grade	163	44,5	101	27,8	264	36,2
	10th Grade	111	30,3	106	29,2	217	29,8
	11th Grade	90	24,6	133	36,6	223	30,6
	12th Grade	2	0,5	23	6,3	25	3,4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>729</b>	<b>100</b>

In terms of gender, 55.6% of the students participating in the study were female, while 44.4% were male. Regarding grade levels, 36.2% of the students were in the 9th grade, 29.8% in the 10th grade, 30.6% in the 11th grade, and 3.4% in the 12th grade. Since there was no direct data source regarding the high schools

preferred by graduates of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools, announcements were made by school administrations in the selected institutions to identify students who had graduated from an Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School. Therefore, achieving a homogeneous distribution of participants in terms of grade level and gender proved difficult. In addition, due to factors such as preparation for the university entrance examination and transfer to open high education, the number of 12th-grade students was relatively low.

### 1.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The research data were collected in person by the researchers during the second semester of the 2022–2023 academic year through school visits. Data from Imam Hatip High Schools were obtained from students in classes determined jointly with the school administration. In the case of non-Imam Hatip high schools, since the number of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates was relatively low compared to the total student body, students from different classes were gathered in venues designated by the school administration (such as the library, conference hall, or classroom). In line with the purpose of the study, and considering the need to ask different questions depending on whether the students continued their education in an Imam Hatip or a non-Imam Hatip high school, two separate questionnaire forms were prepared by taking expert opinions into account. Accordingly, one questionnaire was administered to Imam Hatip graduates studying at Imam Hatip High Schools, and another to Imam Hatip graduates enrolled in other types of high schools.

For data analysis, the SPSS 22.0 statistical software package was used. Initially, descriptive analyses were performed, followed by chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) analyses examining the relationships between variables such as gender, school type, grade level, parental education level, and family income. In chi-square analysis, if the frequency in any observation cell is less than five and such cells exceed 20% of the total, the reliability of the test results is negatively affected. In such cases, it is recommended either to merge certain rows or columns in a logically consistent manner or to treat observations with frequencies below five as missing data (Büyüköztürk, 2014, pp. 158–159). Accordingly, to ensure the reliability of findings in this study, data from 11th and 12th grades were combined due to the low participation rate in the 12th grade. Similarly, in the family income variable, the “0–5,500 TL” and “5,500–10,000 TL” categories were merged and reclassified as “less than 10,000 TL.” In analyses based on variables, the “No response” category was treated as missing data and excluded when the cell frequency was below five. For all chi-square tests, the significance level was set at  $p < 0.05$ . In order to maintain the analytical focus and avoid unnecessary volume, only findings showing statistically significant differences between variables were reported.

## 2. Findings

### 2.1. Factors Influencing Students’ Preferences for Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools

Students were asked to select the statement that best described the reason they attended an Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School and to mark only one option. The findings are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** *Reasons Influencing Students' Preferences for Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools*

	Imam Hatip High School		Other High School	
	N	%	N	%
I attended upon my family's guidance.	193	52,7	155	42,7
I attended of my own choice.	105	28,7	123	33,9
I chose it because it offered both academic and religious education.	35	9,6	50	13,8
I attended for other reasons (relatives' advice, peer influence, recommendation of the primary school Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge teacher, proximity to home).	28	7,7	34	9,4
No response.	5	1,4	1	0,3
<b>Total</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>100</b>

According to the findings, the most influential factor in students' decision to pursue their lower secondary education at an Imam Hatip was family guidance. Among students attending Imam Hatip High Schools, this rate (52.7%) was higher than that of students attending other types of high schools (42.7%). The proportion of Imam Hatip High School students who stated that they attended Imam Hatip Lower Secondary of their own choice was 28.7%, whereas this rate was 33.9% among students in other high school types. The factor of combining academic and religious education was found to be more significant among students in non-Imam Hatip high schools (13.8%) compared to Imam Hatip students (9.6%). Apart from these, a smaller proportion of students reported other reasons—such as relatives' advice, peer influence, or school proximity—as influencing factors. In both groups, the predominance of family influence in the decision to attend an Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School can be regarded as an expected finding. Given that students complete primary school around the age of ten, family influence and guidance in choosing the next educational level are quite natural. In Man's (2024, pp. 147–148) qualitative study, it was observed that most students who reported attending Imam Hatip Lower Secondary due to family guidance expressed similar views, indicating little divergence between student and parent perspectives in this regard. However, Aşlamacı's (2017c) findings differ from the present study: in that research, 51.9% of students reported choosing Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School of their own will, while 31.7% indicated that it was due to family preference. On the other hand, the findings of Ünalı (2019) and Kara (2016) are consistent with those of the present study, emphasizing the significant role of family influence in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary school choice.

When Imam Hatip high school students' attendance at Imam Hatip Lower Secondary was examined in relation to various variables, a significant difference was observed only with respect to grade level ( $p = 0.01 < 0.05$ ). The proportion of students stating "I attended of my own choice" was 36.4% among 9th graders, 21.8% among 10th graders, and 24.1% among 11th–12th graders. Accordingly, 9th-grade students appeared to have made their decision to attend Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School more independently than those in higher grades. Conversely, the proportion of students agreeing with "I attended upon my family's guidance" was 49.4% in 9th grade, 59.1% in 10th grade, and 54% in 11th–12th grades. These results indicate that family influence was significantly lower among 9th graders, suggesting a trend toward greater student autonomy in school choice decisions over time. Regarding the statement "I chose it because it offered both academic and religious education," the rate was 7.4% among 9th graders, 14.5% among 10th graders, and 8% among 11th–12th graders, indicating that 10th graders were relatively more influenced by the school's dual academic-religious education structure. For the statement "I attended for other reasons," the rate among 11th–12th graders (13.8%) was higher than that among 9th (6.8%) and 10th (4.5%) graders.

When the same analysis was conducted for students attending non-İHL high schools, no statistically significant differences were found in relation to any of the examined variables.

## 2.2. Factors Influencing Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School Graduates' Preference for Imam Hatip High Schools

Multiple factors may influence students' school choices. Considering this, fourteen items were identified to determine the factors affecting the preferences of students who continued their education at Imam Hatip High Schools. Students were asked to mark "yes" if they agreed with each item and "no" if they did not. Nonresponses were also indicated in Table 4.

**Table 4.** *Factors Influencing Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School Graduates' Preference for Imam Hatip High Schools*

	Yes		No		No Response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I preferred to study at an Imam Hatip High School because my family directed me to do so.	241	65,8	12	32,8	5	1,4
I personally wanted to study at an Imam Hatip High School.	187	51,7	173	47,3	6	1,6
I preferred it because both academic and religious education are provided together.	167	45,6	188	51,4	11	3
Although my LGS score was sufficient for admission to another school, I still chose the Imam Hatip High School.	142	38,8	214	58,5	10	2,7
I preferred the Imam Hatip High School because my LGS score was not sufficient for another school.	138	37,7	217	59,3	11	3
The encouragement and guidance of my lower secondary school teachers were influential.	125	34,2	233	63,7	8	2,2
I chose it because, as a graduate of an Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School, it was a continuation of that education.	120	32,8	237	64,8	9	2,5
I preferred it because I wanted to have the Imam Hatip identity.	110	30,1	242	66,1	14	3,8
I preferred it because the Imam Hatip High School does not offer co-educational (mixed-gender) learning.	94	25,7	263	71,6	9	2,5
I preferred it because the school's physical facilities (building, laboratories, gym, etc.) were good.	68	18,6	288	78,7	10	2,7
I chose it under the influence of my relatives.	66	18	293	79,8	7	1,9
I chose it because my friends studied at an Imam Hatip High School.	56	15,3	305	83,3	5	1,4
I preferred it because it was close to my home.	50	13,7	308	84,2	8	2,2
I preferred it because it offered dormitory opportunities.	50	13,7	306	83,6	10	2,7

When the responses regarding the factors influencing Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates' preference for Imam Hatip High Schools were examined, it was found that 65.8% of the students made this choice under family influence, while 32.8% reported no such influence. Accordingly, about two-thirds of students studying at Imam Hatip High Schools were directed by their families in making this decision. A statistically significant difference was found only in relation to the grade level variable ( $p = 0.03 < 0.05$ ). Family influence was the highest among 10th-grade students (75.7%) and the lowest among 9th-grade students (60.8%). Comparing these findings with previous studies reveals both similarities and differences. For example, in Aşlamacı's (2017b, p. 31) study, the most frequent reason for preference was "my own choice" (40.3%), followed by "family influence" (36.8%). Similarly, Çınar (2018, p. 1248) found that 32.1% of participants chose "at my family's request," while 28.8% said "a joint decision between me and my family." Zengin and Karaman (2020, pp. 360–361) concluded that family guidance was the most important factor in choosing project-based Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools. Comparable results were reported by Erikoğlu

(2019) and by Özensel and Aydemir (2014, pp. 52–54), who emphasized the father's influence, as well as by Özdemir and Karateke (2018, pp. 16–25), who found that family was the primary determinant.

51.7% of the students indicated that they chose to study at an Imam Hatip High School of their own will, while 47.3% said otherwise. When combined with the family influence factor, it is evident that families have a strong role in students' school choices. No significant difference was found between variables for this item.

Regarding the preference for schools offering both academic and religious education, 45.6% of students answered "yes," and 51.4% answered "no." This indicates that the school's integrated program affected the preferences of only about half of the students. Given that Imam Hatip High Schools differ from other institutions mainly in their curriculum and school culture, the fact that this feature was not a major factor for most students is noteworthy. A significant difference was found only for gender ( $p = 0.01 < 0.05$ ): male students (54.1%) were more likely than female students (40.5%) to select the school for its combined academic and religious education. Öztürk (2023, pp. 57–58) emphasizes in his study that students primarily choose Imam Hatip High Schools to receive a qualified religious education. However, in the case of Project Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools, it is observed that students also select these institutions in line with their academic career goals. When preference reasons are examined by gender, it is observed that male students' educational expectations are more career-oriented than those of female students. Furthermore, the study reveals that students perceive Imam Hatip High Schools not as vocational institutions, but rather as academic secondary education institutions. Similarly, Sarı (2019, p. 107) found that although most students and parents do not plan a career in the field of religious services, they prefer Imam Hatip High Schools with the aim of receiving religious education. In Çınar's (2018, p. 1248) study as well, students were found to perceive these schools not merely as institutions preparing individuals for religious professions, but as schools where they can pursue academic education while also receiving religious education.

While 38.8% of the students stated that they chose an Imam Hatip High School even though their LGS score was sufficient to enroll in a different type of high school, 58.5% answered "no" to this question. This finding indicates that slightly more than one-third of the students preferred an Imam Hatip High School out of an idealistic motivation, despite having the opportunity to attend another type of school. Similarly, 37.7% of the students stated that they chose an Imam Hatip High School because their LGS score was not sufficient to be admitted to another school, while 59.3% answered "no." This suggests that about one-third of the students selected an Imam Hatip High School due to limited exam results. When both findings are considered together, it can be suggested that roughly one-third of the students demonstrated an idealistic orientation in choosing an Imam Hatip High Schools, while another one-third attended these schools because their LGS scores restricted other options. No statistically significant differences were found between these two variables and other related factors.

The proportion of students who stated that the encouragement and guidance of their lower secondary school teachers influenced their decision to choose an Imam Hatip High School was 34.2%. Since two-thirds of the students reported that their teachers had no influence on this decision, it can be said that teachers had only a partial impact on Imam Hatip High School preferences. In terms of variables, there were significant differences regarding gender and type of high school. With respect to gender ( $p = 0.03 < 0.05$ ), teacher encouragement and guidance were influential for 40.6% of male students and 29.8% of female students, indicating that lower secondary school teachers had a greater influence on male students. In terms of high school type ( $p = 0.002 < 0.05$ ), the influence of teachers was higher among students attending project-based Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools (41.9%) compared to those in regular Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools. This finding suggests that lower secondary school teachers tended to encourage students more strongly to apply to selective, project-based schools that admit students based on their LGS scores.

A total of 32.8% of the students stated that they chose an Imam Hatip High School as a continuation of their education after graduating from an Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School, while 64.8% disagreed with this view. The fact that only about one-third of the students perceived Imam Hatip High School as a natural continuation of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School, whereas two-thirds did not see any continuity between these two institutions—despite their similar characteristics and school culture—is a rather noteworthy finding. Considering that Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates constitute the primary source of students for Imam Hatip High Schools, the low tendency among students to view Imam Hatip High Schools as a continuation of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School education is an issue that warrants further examination. When analyzed by variables, a significant difference was found only in terms of gender. According to gender ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ), 45.3% of male students and 23% of female students reported that they preferred Imam Hatip High Schools because they regarded them as a continuation of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School. This indicates that male students are more likely than female students to view and choose Imam Hatip High Schools as a natural continuation of their previous Imam Hatip education.

It was found that the sense of “Imam Hatip identity” played a role in the Imam Hatip High School preferences of 30.1% of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates, while it was not influential for 66.1% of them. This indicates that the identity-forming function—one of the distinctive features of Imam Hatip Schools—has resonated with only about one-third of the students. In terms of variables, a significant difference was observed only with respect to the type of Imam Hatip attended. According to the Imam Hatip type ( $p = 0.02 < 0.05$ ), there was a significant difference in favor of the project-based Imam Hatips, which admit students based on their LGS scores. The sense of Imam Hatip identity influenced 36.4% of students in project-based Imam Hatips, compared to 24.8% of students in address-based regular Imam Hatip High Schools. Accordingly, the perception of the Imam Hatip identity appears to be relatively stronger among students in project-based Imam Hatip High Schools.

Coeducation is a phenomenon debated worldwide from religious, political, ideological, and educational perspectives. In Türkiye, the fact that boys and girls are educated separately in Imam Hatip schools is considered important by many parents, who therefore direct their children to these institutions. In the research, only 25.7% of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates who chose Imam Hatip High Schools agreed with the statement “I preferred it because the Imam Hatip High School does not offer co-educational (mixed-gender) learning,” while 71.6% disagreed. This indicates that for three-quarters of the students, the absence of coeducation was not a determining factor in their preference for Imam Hatip High Schools. However, when analyzed by variables, a significant difference was found in terms of gender ( $p = 0.01 < 0.05$ ). Although the absence of coeducation was not a primary reason for either gender, 31.9% of female students and 20.2% of male students stated that they chose Imam Hatip High School for this reason. Conversely, 68.1% of females and 79.8% of males responded negatively. These results suggest that female students tend to prefer single-sex education more than male students.

Among Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates who continued their education in Imam Hatip High Schools, only 18.6% stated that the physical conditions of the schools influenced their choice, while 78.7% indicated that they were not influenced by this factor. This finding suggests that the physical environment of the schools did not play a major role in students’ decisions to choose Imam Hatip High Schools. When analyzed by variables, significant differences were found in terms of gender ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ) and grade level ( $p = 0.04 < 0.05$ ). In this context, 26.3% of female students and 11.2% of male students agreed with the statement “I preferred it because the school’s physical facilities were good.” Conversely, 73.7% of female students and 88.8% of male students disagreed. This indicates that good physical conditions are a more influential factor for female students than for males when choosing a school. Regarding grade level, 15.9% of 9th graders, 16.7% of 10th graders, and 28.1% of 11th and 12th graders stated that they preferred

the school due to its good physical conditions. This suggests that upper-grade students (11th and 12th) tend to attach greater importance to physical facilities compared to those in lower grades.

The influence of relatives on Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates' decisions to choose an Imam Hatip High School was found to be limited. Only 18% of the students stated that they chose an Imam Hatip High School due to the influence of relatives, while 79.8% reported no such influence. This finding indicates that family relatives have a minimal impact on students' school choices, and that other factors play a more significant role in their decision-making process. No significant differences were found across variables.

Similarly, the effect of peer influence —that is, friends choosing to attend an Imam Hatip High School — also appeared to be low. Only 15.3% of students reported that their friends' attendance influenced their own choice, while 83.3% said it had no effect. A significant difference, however, was found by grade level ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ). Specifically, 8.9% of 9th-grade, 22.5% of 10th-grade, and 18.9% of 11th–12th-grade students agreed with the statement “I chose it because my friends studied at an Imam Hatip High School.” This suggests that peer influence is lowest among 9th graders and relatively higher among students in upper grades.

The proximity of the Imam Hatip High School to students' homes was also found not to be a significant factor in their school choices. Only 13.7% of students agreed with the statement “I preferred it because it was close to my home.” while 84.2% disagreed. A significant difference was found only by grade level ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ). Specifically, 8.9% of 9th-grade, 13.8% of 10th-grade, and 23.3% of 11th–12th-grade students reported choosing Imam Hatip High Schools because of its proximity to their homes.

Similarly, the availability of dormitory or boarding facilities at Imam Hatip High Schools did not appear to play a major role in students' choices. Only 13.7% stated that they chose these schools for its dormitory/boarding opportunities, while 83.6% said this was not a factor. However, significant differences were found by school type, grade level, and father's education level. By school type ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ), only 0.6% of students from neighborhood-based Imam Hatips cited dormitory facilities as influential, compared to 24.7% of students from project-based Imam Hatips. This can be explained by the fact that project-based Imam Hatips, which admit students based on LGS scores, offer dormitory facilities and attract students from different regions. By grade level ( $p = 0.02 < 0.05$ ), 19.7% of 9th graders, 10.2% of 10th graders, and 9% of 11th–12th graders stated that the availability of dormitories influenced their choice. Thus, dormitory opportunities appear to be more influential for 9th graders than for students in higher grades. Finally, by father's education level ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ), 8.2% of students whose fathers were primary or lower secondary graduates, 11% of those whose fathers were high school graduates, and 23.1% of those whose fathers had a university or postgraduate degree stated that dormitory/boarding opportunities affected their decision to attend an Imam Hatip High School.

### **2.3. Factors Influencing Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School Graduates' Decision Not to Choose Imam Hatip High Schools**

For students who completed their education at Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools but chose to continue their education in non-Imam Hatip high schools, eleven possible reasons were identified. Students were asked to mark “yes” for the statements they agreed with and “no” for those they did not. Responses from participants who did not answer some statements were also indicated in Table 5.

**Table 5.** *Factors Influencing Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School Graduates' Decision Not to Choose Imam Hatip High Schools*

	Yes		No		No Response	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because I was not interested in the vocational/religious courses offered there.	249	68,6	111	30,6	3	0,8
I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because I did not find it academically successful.	199	54,8	160	44,1	4	1,1
I chose another type of high school because my LGS score was high.	142	39,1	219	60,3	2	0,6
I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because coeducation is not provided there.	137	37,7	223	61,4	3	0,8
I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because I thought Imam Hatip High School graduates might face problems again when entering university in the future.	123	33,9	236	65	4	1,1
Although my family wanted me to attend an Imam Hatip High School, I chose another type of high school based on my own preference.	118	32,5	243	66,9	2	0,6
I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because I did not want to adopt the Imam Hatip identity.	85	23,4	274	75,5	4	1,1
I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because its physical facilities (building, laboratories, sports hall, etc.) were inadequate.	80	22	280	77,1	3	0,8
During the high school preference period, my lower secondary school guidance service directed me toward non-Imam Hatip schools.	77	21,2	283	78	3	0,8
I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because my family wanted me to attend another type of high school.	47	12,9	312	86	4	1,1
I could not choose Imam Hatip High School because there was not one close to my home.	29	8	332	91,5	2	0,6

When examining the factors influencing students' decisions not to choose an Imam Hatip High School, it was found that lack of interest in vocational/religious courses and perception of low academic success were among the most frequently stated reasons. Specifically, 68.6% of students agreed with the statement "I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because I was not interested in the vocational/religious courses offered there," while 30.6% disagreed. This finding indicates that two-thirds of the students' decisions not to choose Imam Hatip High School were strongly influenced by their lack of interest in vocational courses. No significant differences were found between variables. Man's (2024, pp. 61–62) study, which surveyed students who attended Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School and then continued either in Imam Hatip or non-Imam Hatip high schools, revealed high satisfaction levels with vocational courses other than Arabic at the Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School level. However, it is noteworthy that Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates—who were already familiar with and generally satisfied with vocational courses—reported not choosing Imam Hatip High School because they found its vocational courses uninteresting. This contrast suggests the need for further, in-depth research to understand the underlying causes. Similarly, in Aslan's (2022, p. 41) study, 71.7% of students disagreed with the statement "The Qur'an course at the Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School was too difficult, so it affected my decision not to choose Imam Hatip High School." Likewise, Aşlamacı's (2017a, p. 215) research found that students' attitudes toward vocational courses at Imam Hatip High Schools were at a moderate level.

Among the students who graduated from Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools but chose to continue their education in schools other than Imam Hatip High Schools, 54.8% agreed with the statement "I did not

choose Imam Hatip High School because I did not find it academically successful,” while 44.1% disagreed. In the 2022–2023 academic year, graduates of Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools achieved 57 rankings within the top 100, 436 within the top 1,000, 3,567 within the top 10,000, 6,997 within the top 20,000, and 37,887 within the top 100,000 in the Higher Education Institutions Exam (YKS 2022) (Din Öğretimi Genel Müdürlüğü, 2022). However, the fact that Project Imam Hatip Schools in Sakarya admit students with lower minimum LGS scores compared to Science High Schools, Social Sciences High Schools, and Anatolian High Schools may have contributed to the perception that these schools are academically less successful. Qualitative interviews conducted with Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates studying at Science High Schools in Sakarya support this interpretation; some students stated that they might have preferred Imam Hatips if there had been one with an admission threshold close to that of Science High Schools (Man, 2024). The diversification of programs and the implementation of the “project school” model in Imam Hatip Schools are considered important steps toward enabling these schools to compete with other types of high schools and to raise their academic standards. According to the variables, significant differences were found in terms of father’s education level ( $p=0.04<0.05$ ) and family income ( $p=0.00<0.05$ ). Among students whose fathers held a bachelor’s or postgraduate degree, 64.2% stated that they did not choose Imam Hatip High School because they did not find it academically successful, compared to 58.6% of those whose fathers were high school graduates and 47.7% of those whose fathers had completed only primary or lower secondary education. This finding indicates that as the father’s education level increases, the perception of Imam Hatip Schools as academically successful decreases, which in turn affects the decision not to choose these schools. Similarly, 62.9% of students from families with an income of 20,000 TL or more, 60.6% of those with an income between 10,000–20,000 TL, and 42.3% of those with an income below 10,000 TL reported that they did not choose Imam Hatip High School because they did not consider it academically successful. This shows that higher family income is associated with a lower perception of Imam Hatip Schools’ academic success. In Aslan’s (2022, p. 41) study, 12.6% of the students disagreed and 57.4% agreed with the statement, “I believe the quality of education at my current school is better than that of non-project Imam Hatip Schools.” In the same study, 48.6% of the participants agreed with the statement, “The fact that questions from vocational/religious courses (Qur’an, Arabic, Tafsir, Hadith, Kalam, etc.) will not appear in the university entrance exam influenced my preference.” Likewise, in Man’s (2024, p. 144) research, among graduates of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools who did not choose Imam Hatip High School, 27.4% cited negative attitudes toward the academic education in Imam Hatip Schools as the second most common reason for not choosing them again. Taken together, these findings suggest that perceptions regarding the academic quality of Imam Hatip Schools play a significant role in shaping students’ school preferences.

When examining the impact of students’ High School Entrance Exam (LGS) scores on their decision to choose or not choose Imam Hatip High Schools, 39.1% of students agreed with the statement “I chose another type of high school because my LGS score was high,” while 60.3% disagreed. This indicates that only about one-third of students refrained from choosing Imam Hatip High Schools due to their high LGS scores, suggesting that factors other than exam performance also play a decisive role in school selection. Significant differences were found based on school type ( $p=0.00<0.05$ ) and father’s education level ( $p=0.00<0.05$ ). Among graduates of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools who preferred Science High Schools, 86.8% stated that they did not choose Imam Hatip High Schools because their LGS scores were high. Similarly, 88.7% of students attending Anatolian High Schools that admit students based on LGS scores gave the same response. In contrast, the rate was 18.4% among students attending address-based Anatolian High Schools and 22.9% among those in Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools. Regarding the father’s education variable, 29.2% of students whose fathers had completed primary or lower secondary school, 42.2% of those whose fathers were high school graduates, and 50.6% of those whose fathers held a bachelor’s or postgraduate degree indicated that they did not choose Imam Hatip High School because their LGS scores were high. Accordingly, as the father’s education level increases, the influence of high LGS scores on choosing a non-Imam Hatip school becomes more pronounced.

Regarding the statement “I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because coeducation is not provided there,” 37.7% of students answered “yes,” while 61.4% answered “no.” This finding indicates that the absence of coeducation was a reason for not choosing Imam Hatip High School for only about one-third of the students. A significant difference was found only in terms of gender ( $p=0.02<0.05$ ). Among male students, 45.6% stated that they did not choose Imam Hatip because coeducation was not offered, whereas 33% of female students gave the same response. This suggests that the absence of coeducation was a more influential factor for male students than for female students in their decision not to choose Imam Hatip High Schools.

Regarding the statement “I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because I thought Imam Hatip High School graduates might face problems again when entering university in the future,” 33.9% of the students agreed, while 65% disagreed. During the February 28 process, policies such as the coefficient inequality in university entrance exams and the headscarf ban had negative consequences for Imam Hatip Schools. For instance, while Imam Hatip High Schools constituted 15.39% of the total number of secondary schools in the 1996/97 academic year, this ratio dropped to 2.37% by 2003/04. Although the number of these schools has statistically increased since the removal of the coefficient restriction, it appears that the developments experienced during the February 28 process still influence some parents and students today. Consequently, concerns that similar restrictions might reoccur may lead some students to prefer other types of high schools. No significant differences were found across the variables. In Erikoğlu’s (2019, p. 174) study, 75% of the Imam Hatip students stated that they would not have chosen Imam Hatip if the coefficient system were still applied in university entrance exams. This finding is noteworthy as it highlights how restrictive policies associated with Imam Hatip Schools continue to affect students’ preferences.

In response to the statement “Although my family wanted me to attend an Imam Hatip High School, I chose another type of high school based on my own preference,” 32.5% of students answered yes, while 66.9% answered no. This finding indicates that two-thirds of the students shared a common tendency with their families regarding their high school preferences. However, one-third of the students stated that, despite their families’ wishes, they chose an high school other than an Imam Hatip. It can be considered natural that parents whose children studied at an Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School would want them to continue their education at an Imam Hatip High School. However, when the possibility of parental pressure on students is taken into account, this finding suggests that such pressure was not evident. Indeed, even though families preferred their children to study at Imam Hatip High Schools, students reported being able to choose other types of high schools. Similarly, in Erikoğlu’s (2019, p. 59) study, some parents who had sent their children to Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School stated that they were not opposed to their children choosing a different type of high school and that they viewed positively their children’s decision to pursue their preferred field after acquiring basic religious knowledge in lower secondary school. These findings indicate that families and students largely tend to make joint decisions regarding high school preferences. When examined by variables, a significant difference was found only in terms of high school type ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ). Among students who attended Anatolian High Schools based on their residential address, 37% stated that they preferred a non-Imam Hatip school despite their families’ wishes. This rate was 14.8% among students attending Anatolian High Schools admitting students based on LGS scores, 18.9% among those in Science High Schools, and 47.9% among those in Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools. Accordingly, it appears that students attending Science High Schools and LGS-based Anatolian High Schools experienced lower rates of conflict with their families, whereas those choosing address-based Anatolian High Schools or Vocational and Technical Anatolian High Schools had higher rates of disagreement. This suggests that families tend to have a stronger inclination for their children to attend Imam Hatip High Schools rather than these two types of schools.

In response to the statement “I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because I did not want to adopt the Imam Hatip identity,” 23.4% of the students agreed, while 75.5% disagreed. This indicates that the

reluctance to identify as an Imam Hatip student did not resonate with three-quarters of the students and did not have a significant influence on their high school preferences. Considering that among students who attended Imam Hatip High Schools, the “Imam Hatip identity” was effective in their decision at a rate of 30.1%, it can be understood that this identity plays a relatively limited role in determining whether students continue their education at an Imam Hatip or another type of high school. It is noteworthy that the “Imam Hatip identity,” which constitutes one of the core claims of these schools, did not emerge as a highly determining factor in the high school preferences of students who attended Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools. No significant differences were found across variables. Similarly, in a study by Türköz (2021, p. 1211), it was stated that although a general “Imam Hatip identity” has formed among Imam Hatip students, earlier graduates believed that this identity has weakened among more recent cohorts. This also suggests that the Imam Hatip identity is not a prominent variable influencing students’ decisions to choose an Imam Hatip School.

Among the factors influencing students’ preference for non-Imam Hatip high schools, 22% of the students stated that the inadequate physical conditions of Imam Hatip High Schools (such as buildings, laboratories, or sports facilities) affected their decision, while 77.1% said it did not. This indicates that the physical conditions of Imam Hatip schools were considered by only about one-fifth of the students when making their school choices. No statistically significant differences were found across variables.

Regarding the statement “During the high school preference period, my lower secondary school guidance service directed me toward non-Imam Hatip schools,” 21.2% of the students agreed, while 78% disagreed. This finding suggests that guidance services influenced approximately one-fifth of the students in their preference for non-Imam Hatip schools. Considering that various parameters—such as LGS exam scores, students’ aspirations, parental expectations, and ideological orientations—play a role in high school choices, it may be assumed that guidance counselors provided advice based on these factors. A statistically significant difference was found by gender ( $p = 0.01 < 0.05$ ). While 17.1% of female students and 27.5% of male students stated that they did not choose an Imam Hatip because their lower secondary school guidance counselors directed them toward other types of schools, this suggests that guidance services tended to direct male students toward non-Imam Hatip schools at a higher rate than female students.

Regarding the statement “I did not choose Imam Hatip High School because my family wanted me to attend another type of high school,” 12.9% of the students agreed, while 86% disagreed. This finding indicates that the rate of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates choosing non-Imam Hatip High Schools due to family influence is relatively low. A statistically significant difference was found by gender ( $p = 0.00 < 0.05$ ). While 19.6% of male students and 8.5% of female students stated that they did not choose an Imam Hatip because their families wanted them to prefer other types of high schools, this suggests that families tended to direct male students toward non-Imam Hatip schools more frequently than female students. A similar result was reported in Aslan’s (2022, p. 38) study, where only 18% of the students agreed with the statement, “My family influenced my decision to attend an high school other than an Imam Hatip High School.”

Concerning the statement “I could not choose Imam Hatip High School because there was not one close to my home,” 8% of the students responded “yes,” while 91.5% said “no.” The very low rate of students citing the lack of a nearby Imam Hatip as a reason for choosing other types of schools indicates that accessibility to Imam Hatip Schools does not constitute a significant problem. No statistically significant differences were found across variables.

## 2.4. Students' Opinions Regarding Choosing an Imam Hatip High School Again If Given Another Chance

Students who attended Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools and subsequently either chose or did not choose an Imam Hatip High School were asked the following question: "If you had the chance to choose your high school again, would you choose an Imam Hatip High School?" The students' responses are presented in Table 6 below.

**Table 6.** *Students' Opinions Regarding Choosing an Imam Hatip High School Again*

<i>Would you choose an Imam Hatip High School again if you had another chance to choose your high school?</i>	<i>Students studying at Imam Hatip High Schools</i>		<i>Students studying at non-Imam Hatip High Schools</i>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	153	41,8	29	8
No	194	53	318	87,6
Undecided	3	0,8	4	1,1
No response	16	4,4	12	3,3
<i>Total</i>	<i>366</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>363</i>	<i>100</i>

Among the students who continued their education at Imam Hatip High Schools, 41.8% stated that they would choose an Imam Hatip again if they had the opportunity, while only 8% of those studying in other types of high schools expressed the same opinion. Conversely, 53% of Imam Hatip students and 87.6% of students in non-Imam Hatip schools answered "no" to this question. Additionally, 0.8% of Imam Hatip students reported being undecided and 4.4% left the question unanswered; among students in other high schools, these rates were 1.1% and 3.3%, respectively. These findings are quite striking, as more than half of the students currently attending Imam Hatip High Schools indicated that they would not choose the same school again if given another chance. The fact that the majority of students in non-Imam Hatip schools stated they would not choose Imam Hatips again suggests that they are generally satisfied with their current schools, whereas Imam Hatip High School students appear to have relatively lower satisfaction levels.

When examined by variables, a statistically significant difference was found among Imam Hatip students in terms of school type ( $p=0.00<0.05$ ). Among students studying at Project Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools, 51.6% stated that they would again choose an Imam Hatip if they had another opportunity, whereas this rate was 34.8% among students in local placement Anatolian Imam Hatip High Schools. This indicates that students admitted to Imam Hatip Schools through the national exam (LGS) are more satisfied with their schools compared to those placed through local enrollment. Although no statistically significant difference was found regarding grade level, the rate of choosing Imam Hatip Schools again decreased as the grade level increased. Specifically, 49% of 9th graders, 44.7% of 10th graders, and 34.8% of 11th–12th graders stated that they would choose an Imam Hatip again if given another chance. This finding suggests that the longer students stay in Imam Hatip Schools, the less likely they are to prefer these schools again. Among students studying in non-Imam Hatip schools, no statistically significant difference was detected according to the variables; however, Anatolian High School and Science High School students were found to have higher rates of stating that they would not choose Imam Hatip compared to students in other school types. In Aşlamacı's (2017b, p. 48) nationwide study, 50.7% of Imam Hatip students stated that they would again prefer to study at an Imam Hatip if given another chance, while 30.3% disagreed and 19% were undecided. This result also highlights that half of the Imam Hatip students hold negative or uncertain views about re-choosing their schools. Similarly, in Aslan's (2022, p. 41) study, only 2.6% of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School graduates studying in non-Imam Hatip schools agreed with the statement, "I regret not choosing an Imam Hatip High School." This finding supports the present study's results, indicating that students in other

high schools are generally not inclined to study at Imam Hatip High Schools even if given another opportunity. These results suggest that the factors influencing students' attitudes toward re-choosing Imam Hatip Schools should be examined in more depth through further research.

### Conclusion

Imam Hatip schools are among the most debated institutions within the Turkish education system. The place of these schools within the secular education structure, their curriculum design, student profile, university preferences, and employment fields of their graduates have long been regarded by secular segments of society as a matter of legitimacy. Conversely, conservative and religious groups view these schools as educational institutions compatible with their own beliefs and values, and therefore support them. It is known that secular circles generally prefer non-Imam Hatip schools. However, in recent years, a decline has been observed in the tendency of students who completed their lower secondary education in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools to continue their education in Imam Hatip High Schools, which are the natural continuation of these schools. Statistical data also confirm this downward trend. Accordingly, this study aims to examine the reasons behind Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School students' preferences for Imam Hatip High Schools or other types of high schools, as well as the factors influencing these choices.

The research findings indicate that family influence is the most significant factor in students' choice to attend Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools. Among Imam Hatip High School students, the effect of family on the decision to attend Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School was found to be higher compared to students who later enrolled in other types of high schools. Conversely, the rate of Imam Hatip High School students attending Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools by their own choice was lower than that of students attending other high schools. This suggests that family influence is relatively more dominant in the Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School choices of future Imam Hatip High School students. One of the most distinctive features that sets Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools apart from other lower secondary schools is their program structure, which combines academic education with religious instruction—a factor that can play a significant role in school selection. Interestingly, students who continue their education outside of Imam Hatip reported this aspect as more influential in their Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School choice than those who later attended Imam Hatip High Schools. This indicates that, even if they did not choose Imam Hatip High Schools for high school, these students still valued their school experience in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary Schools. Other factors, such as relatives' recommendations or peer influence, were found to have a minimal effect on Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School choices. Given that children typically complete primary school around the age of ten, it is expected that family guidance plays a strong role in lower secondary school selection. However, presenting family influence as a form of pressure in public discourse, particularly regarding Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School and Imam Hatip High School attendance, does not reflect an objective perspective. Notably, approximately 50% of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School students' Imam Hatip High School choices were influenced by factors other than family guidance, and this proportion was even higher among students who later attended other high schools.

The reasons behind the high school choices of students who completed their lower secondary school education at Imam Hatip and subsequently enrolled in either Imam Hatip High Schools or other types of high schools were analyzed based on their responses to various statements provided to them. Accordingly, the three statements with which Imam Hatip students most frequently agreed in choosing these schools were family guidance, personal preference, and the provision of religious education alongside academic instruction. As observed in Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School choices, family guidance also emerged as the most influential factor in selecting Imam Hatip High School. In addition, slightly more than half of the students responded positively to the statement indicating that they chose to attend Imam Hatip High School based on their own desire. The fact that Imam Hatip High Schools provide religious education alongside academic

instruction, due to their program structure, was also found to be an important factor in students' school preferences. As is well known, LGS scores significantly influence high school selection. The proportion of students who stated that they chose Imam Hatip High School despite having an LGS score sufficient for another high school (38.8%) was lower than those who disagreed with this statement (58.5%). The relatively low percentage of students who reported choosing Imam Hatip High School because they viewed it as a continuation of Imam Hatip Lower Secondary School (32.8%) or because they desired an "Imam Hatip identity" (30.1%) is noteworthy in terms of the distinguishing characteristics of Imam Hatip Schools. Furthermore, approximately one-third of Imam Hatip High School students indicated that they chose the school because their LGS scores did not allow them to select another high school, suggesting that certain aspects of these schools do not fully meet students' expectations in other respects.

When examining the reasons why students who chose other types of secondary schools did not select Imam Hatip High Schools, it is evident that a lack of interest in the vocational/religious courses and the perception that Imam Hatip Schools are not academically successful are more prominent factors compared to others. Approximately one-third of the students reported that they chose a non-Imam Hatip School because their LGS score was high and because Imam Hatip Schools do not provide coeducational settings. Concerns about the possibility of previous coefficient-based university entrance regulations being re-applied in the future also resonated with about one-third of the students. Various studies have highlighted that due to students' academic inclinations toward different university fields, vocational courses in Imam Hatip Schools are perceived to increase the academic workload in university preparation, making this an important consideration. Consequently, the identity-building and religious-education components of Imam Hatip programs have relatively little influence on school choice, as both students and parents tend to prioritize academic expectations (Zengin & Karaman, 2020). Indeed, although there are successful project-based Imam Hatip Schools, the high tendency of students to perceive Imam Hatip Schools as academically less successful supports this assessment.

When examining students' likelihood of choosing an Imam Hatip High School if given the opportunity to select again, notable results emerge. More than half of the students currently attending Imam Hatip Schools indicated that they would not choose the school again, suggesting a significant issue with school satisfaction. This tendency to avoid re-selection is even higher in non-project Imam Hatip Schools, reflecting greater dissatisfaction. Conversely, students attending non-Imam Hatip Schools overwhelmingly stated that they would not choose Imam Hatip if given a second chance, indicating a high level of satisfaction with their current schools.

Although the research findings provide insight into the factors influencing students' secondary school preferences, certain aspects require more detailed examination. Considering that family guidance is a highly significant factor in both lower and high school choices, the underlying reasons for families' inclinations should be explored more thoroughly. In terms of Imam Hatip preference tendencies, it is particularly important to investigate negative perceptions and attitudes toward vocational/religious courses, taking into account both the structure and workload of the school programs as well as the quality of these courses.

## Declarations

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