

## An investigation of education equality in Türkiye according to today's changing conditions

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### ABSTRACT

Education is a driving force that affects the development level of countries and therefore needs to be addressed in the first place. All segments of society need education in order to reach their potential. In this way, the development of society will enable countries to progress. Many policies have been carried out to solve the problems regarding education. However, there are concerns that the policies implemented in education are creating new problems rather than solving old ones. In order to produce solutions, it is necessary first to understand the problem situation. Therefore, this review study aims to investigate education equality in Türkiye. Poverty, gender, and disability are found as the categories in which problem situations accumulate in terms of education inequality. The literacy rate in Türkiye has increased significantly from the past to the present. However, on the other hand, chronic problems such as the low enrollment rate of girls in rural areas relatively continue to persist. There is a need to reduce the gap between opportunities in rural areas and cities. It is also evident that the participation of children with special needs in education should be increased. Thus, investigating education equality in Türkiye is crucial for policy recommendations and future research. In this study, firstly, the history of education equality in Türkiye was explained, then the vulnerable groups exposed to inequality in education were examined in detail and discussed in the context of the literature.

**Keywords:** Education, development, equality, social policy, educational policy.

## Günümüzün değişen koşullarına göre Türkiye'de eğitim eşitliğinin incelenmesi

### ÖZET

Eğitim, ülkelerin gelişmişlik düzeyini etkileyen itici bir güç olması sebebiyle öncelikle ele alınması gereken konular arasında değerlendirilmektedir. Eğitimin, toplumun tüm kesimlerinden bireylerin potansiyellerine ulaşması için önemli bir ihtiyaç olduğu yadsınamaz bir gerçektir. Böylelikle yüksek eğitim seviyesi sayesinde gelişen toplumlar ülkelerin ilerlemesine doğrudan katkıda bulunmaktadır. Eğitim ile ilgili ortaya çıkan sorunların çözümü noktasında pek çok politika yürürlüğe konmuştur. Ancak, eğitimde uygulanan politikaların eski sorunları çözmek yerine yeni sorunlar yarattığına dair endişeler de bulunmaktadır. Çözüm önerileri üretebilmek için öncelikle problem durumlarının anlaşılması büyük bir öneme sahiptir. Bu sebeple bu derleme çalışması Türkiye'de eğitim eşitliğini günümüzün değişen koşullarını göz önünde bulundurarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Eğitim eşitsizliği açısından problem arz eden durumların yoksulluk, cinsiyet ve engellilik kategorilerinde toplandığı tespit edilmiştir. Türkiye'de okuma-yazma oranı geçmişten günümüze kadar önemli oranda artış göstermiştir. Fakat diğer taraftan, kırsal kesimde kız çocuklarının okullaşma oranının düşük olması gibi kronik sorunlar da nispeten devam etmektedir. Kırsal bölgeler ile şehirlerdeki imkânlar arasındaki farkın azaltılması ihtiyacı bulunmaktadır. Ayrıca özel gereksinimli çocukların eğitime katılımının artırılması gerektiği göze çarpmaktadır. Bu anlamda, Türkiye'de eğitim eşitliğinin araştırılması politika önerileri ve gelecekteki araştırmalar için yol göstermesi açısından önemli görülmektedir. Bu çalışmada ilk olarak Türkiye'de eğitim eşitliğinin tarihçesi anlatılmış, daha sonra eğitimde eşitsizliğe maruz kalan hassas gruplar ayrıntılı olarak incelenerek literatür bağlamında tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Eğitim, kalkınma, eşitlik, sosyal politika, eğitim politikası.

### Introduction

For all societies to achieve a welfare regime, development serves as a primary tool for inclusive progress. Development is a complex process that has no agreed definition of it. However, there is a consensus that the scope of development is broad (Roncaglia de Carvalho et al., 2018). While some scholars emphasize the

relationship of development with growth (Arestis et al., 2015), others consider it in terms of humanitarian conditions (Joireman & Haddad, 2023). At the same time, there are studies emphasizing the relationship of development with peace, welfare, and care services (Hegre, 2005; Takian & Rajaeieh, 2020). In this context, the important thing is how to achieve these goals.

Cremin and Nakabugo (2012) argued that investing in education is a very important way to reduce poverty. Similarly, Psacharopoulos (1988) highlights that education is the key element at the point of achieving development and related concepts for societies. Well-educated societies are expected to produce more value-added products. In addition, these societies can reach public peace. Also, they enable their citizens to think more in a scientific way. Thus, education is the only way to reach a welfare condition (Kiani, 2013; Permani, 2009). However, Kagawa (2005) emphasizes that education is often put in the background in crisis situations. For this reason, education inequality can become more visible in times of crisis. On the other hand, states can invest in areas other than education in order to overcome crisis situations. At this point, it can be discussed whether ignoring education to eliminate the crisis period will lead to a new crisis. That is why education has attracted more attention after times of crisis. After the COVID-19 and the 2023 Maraş Earthquake, the discussions on this issue reached the highest point (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020; Yildiz et al., 2023). It may be useful to consider education, including in crisis situations, for the development of countries.

Education is an important criterion when measuring a country's level of advancement (Sardar & Tobawal, 2019). The countries that provide equal education opportunities are generally those whose children are not much affected by their parents' socio-economic conditions (Aydemir & Yazıcı, 2019). Although many social states are evaluated according to what they provide for their citizens to achieve equality, there are still inequalities in many areas, like education. These continuing inequalities should be also considered for Türkiye as it is for other countries (Altunöz, 2021; Peterson, 2014; Tannock & Tannock, 2018). There may be many internal and external factors that affect the emergence of this situation. Instead of looking for any guilty, describing the equality issue directly and revealing the deficiencies will be beneficial in terms of solving the problem. If this problem situation can be put forward correctly, solution suggestions can be produced effectively. For this purpose, this study aims to investigate education equality in Türkiye with focusing poverty and other sub-vulnerabilities like gender and disabilities by considering existing literature and today's changing conditions.

### **Background and Historical Context of Education Equality in Türkiye**

Education has its own characteristics in each country (Webb & Chaffer, 2016). Most importantly, education in Türkiye has undergone many changes (Baloglu, 2017; Tinaz et al., 2014). In order to better understand education equality in Türkiye, first of all, it is necessary to examine the history of education equality in Türkiye.

The first steps were the standardization of education and the adaptation of the Turkish education system to international education practices. First of all, Türkiye launched the "Unification in Education Law". With this, all education institutions in Türkiye were unified under the Ministry of Education. With the same ambition, the Turkish parliament has accepted the "law regarding the education organization" (TGNA, 1926). This included standardization of education, accepting compulsory elementary education, and a co-educational system. This was followed up by the letter revolution in 1928 for the adaptation of the Turkish educational system with the developed West (TGNA, 1928). In addition to this, because of the uneducated population in Türkiye, the government started a wide range of education campaigns, including for adults. It launched "nation schools" to educate the adult population and gave the main focus on increasing literacy levels for all ages (Albayrak, 1989). Later, the Turkish government thought to spread education into rural areas of Türkiye, taking into consideration the local needs, and launched Village Institutions (Official Gazette, 1940). This educational reform sought both to enlighten the rural population and train them according to their local needs. (Stone, 1974) However, this was later not continued and turned into technical/training schools or closed completely in the 1950s. In the 1940s, Türkiye tried to provide modernization of its educational system. It also launched laws regarding universities in 1946 and provided legal persona of them in an autonomous way. After that, Türkiye tried to modernize secondary schools and legally trained teachers for this level in 1947. This era highly focused on training future teachers and encouraged "teacher schools". Furthermore, this aim has increased for decades (Stone, 1974).

In 1974, Türkiye first put the requirement for teachers to complete their higher education. Despite all attempts of the Turkish government to increase the quality of education and standardization, in these years, the most significant challenges were mobility of education through reaching all rural areas utilizing building schools and the quantity of qualified teaching staff. The main aim of the Turkish government has been to reach out to every segment of the population and deliver basic education (Güvenç, 1998). When this aim is considered in terms of whether it reached its goal, the findings of UNESCO are crucial. According to UNESCO (2019), Türkiye's literacy rate is 96,7. Therefore, Türkiye has achieved its primary aim of education equality by delivering basic education to every segment of the population. However, the issue of education equality is still a question. Moreover, literacy rates cannot be seen as the only component of education. In these years, one of the biggest challenges also became to train qualified teaching forces. Furthermore, every new policy maker's attempt to apply its own interventions to education also creates challenges in reaching a stabilization in education (Saraplı, 2020). At this point, the Turkish education system, which can be considered dynamic and changeable, should be examined in terms of equality. In this way, possible solutions can be suggested by seeing which vulnerable groups experience what kind of problems.

### Poverty and Education in Türkiye

According to the OECD, the Gini coefficient in income distribution in Türkiye is 0.4 (OECD Income Inequality, 2020). This makes Türkiye an average level when compared with other countries. However, when PISA tests are taken into account, there is a 76-point gap between students from socioeconomically low and high-income segments of the population. This difference is lower in some countries whose income distribution level is lower than in Türkiye (OECD, 2019). This means that despite Türkiye being in the average range by means of the income distribution, it has more gap between low and high-income segments in terms of education. When evaluated in general, income distribution stands out as a factor that directly affects education in Türkiye. There is a great need for support for students from low socioeconomic families to catch up with their peers in education. Children from low socioeconomic families should be at the center of education policies regarding their integration into education and their success.

When it comes to the proportion of children and young people achieving a minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics, it is not improving. According to the United Nations, the proportion of lower secondary schools was %63 in 2003 and decreased to %56 in 2019. At the primary level, it decreased from 72,3 to 70 from 2001 to 2008 (2003 data was unavailable) (UN Stats, 2022). These rates, which show a decline in terms of quantity, also need to be examined qualitatively. However, in today's conditions where the goal of inclusiveness in education is pursued, sufficient educational institutions are an important goal to increase the minimum education level of children.

When it comes to education equality in Türkiye, again, UN statistics show the relationship between income level and education level, which may be explanatory of the results of PISA gaps. According to the UN, quantile 1 level, which is the lowest-income population of Türkiye, has a completion rate of upper-secondary schools is %23,7 and it is 84,7 for quantile 5, which is the highest-income population in Türkiye according to 2014 data (which is the most recent available data). (UN Stats, 2022). There is a huge gap between low- and high-income populations. This gap increases against low-income level populations when comparing rural and urban populations. Rather than segments, regional differentiations also take attention. In Western parts of Türkiye, schooling rates are highest at %90 and above, while in the eastern part, it decreases to %75 (Coşkun et al., 2020). This is consistent with the data of lower and higher income regions' differences. This points out the need for more social policies regarding income-level inequality in terms of education.

Another issue is preschool education. According to Barnett and Ackermann (2020), preschool education has a significant role in children's future success through academic success. However, considering Türkiye's condition in this sense, more policies aiming to increase preschool rates are needed. In 2015, preschooling rates were %37, and a goal was set to reach %70 by the Ministry of Education's strategic plan (MEB, 2015). However, when it comes to 2019, rates are at a level of %44, which is a very slight increase, and it places Türkiye significantly lower than the OECD average, which is %83 (MEB, 2019). According to Education Reform Enterprise (2021), the percentage of children registered in the school by aging shows the actual condition is better. 3 age registration percentage is %6, 4 age percentage is %17, and 5 age children's percentage is %59. There is a need for an increase in preschool education in line with strategic plans and targets. As age increases, the rate of inclusion of preschool children in education increases, and this shows that families are looking for a certain maturation period for their children in terms of preschool education.

In 2012, the Turkish government launched a new education reform, claiming to eliminate inequalities and involve all segments of the population in education, which is called the "4+4+4" system, separating education levels into three segments. As a complement to this reform, in 2018, "Passing to the High Schools System" was launched by the government. According to this system, students first choose the schools they want to study within the examination system. If they cannot succeed, they may go with "address-based selection system." Furthermore, if they succeed in none of them, they will be sent to open education high schools (Atılğan, 2018; ERG, 2018; Tanrısevi & Kırıl, 2018). Baysu and Agirdag (2019) indicate that children may be forced to attend some school types due to their increased number. At this point, children should have more choices. On the other hand, the number of private schools is increasing (Dag, 2015). Private schools are important in terms of filling the gap left by public schools (Culbertson & Constant, 2015). Nonetheless, there is a fee to be paid for going to private school. While Education Equality advocates the equality of all students in education, it is a big problem that some students have an advantage. Kingdon (2020) indicates that private schools have more facilities and are, therefore, more likely to provide higher-quality education. In the same manner, Dahal and Nguyen (2014) highlight that students in private schools are more academically successful. At this point, it is an important inequality that students cannot access the types of schools they want to enroll in. Furthermore, it is easier for some students to enroll in the schools of their choice because they are better off financially than others.

The last issue is the condition of education equality during the Covid-19 pandemic. The covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected a variety of areas, and education is one of them (Kang, 2021). According to (ERG, 2021), almost all schools were closed for more than half of the term in Türkiye. The Turkish government took action by spreading the Education IT Network (Eğitim Bilişim Ağı or EBA in Turkish) all over Türkiye (Karanfil & Özet, 2021). However, EBA requires communication materials, and not all children in Türkiye have access to these materials because of economic conditions. In rural areas, this problem is inevitably more overt (Yıldırım, 2019). According to ERG, the "digital gap" has increased educational inequality between children. The government took action to award every student with an internet package, but at least %11,5 of the children have no opportunity to use this package because there is no device to use it (ERG, 2021). The government has launched EBA support points for rural areas by September 2021, but it is early to measure its effectiveness for now. However, according to the

World Bank (2020), by June 2020, the poorest population's access to education is %20. If this pandemic forces the government to turn and increase the digitalization of Türkiye in terms of education, it may turn into an advantage for decreasing the gap.

### **Other Vulnerable Groups and Education Equality in Türkiye**

According to Coşkun et al. (2020), schooling proportions for middle school are promising. There is only %0,3 gap between gender, and rates can be seen as very high, with %88,7 in girls and %89 in boys. UN statistics also validate this condition, and in upper secondary school rates, female completion rates passed male completion rates with % 2 difference in 2016 (UN STATS, 2022). According to Cin and Walker (2016), this is mainly the positive impact of CSOs that from the 1990s and increasing after the 2000s in Türkiye. Civil society has given vital importance to gender equality in education and launched a number of ongoing campaigns, scholarships, and support programs. However, there are also individual problems continuing on the table. For instance, in the same dataset in UN Statistics, data are dramatic for rural quantile one population (lowest income population). When rural quantile one male children's completion rate of lower secondary school is %93, this proportion remains at %74 for girls. At this point, the attitudes of families can be a driving force. Families living in rural areas tend to send their sons to school, but their attitudes toward their girls differ (Kalkan & Gürses, 2017; Smits & Hoşgör, 2006). This gender discrimination is another obstacle to education equality.

According to ERG, finding verified data for schooling rates of children with disabilities is almost impossible. UN statistics also support this view that no data is available for disability inclusion in Türkiye. However, according to academic research, children with disabilities' rate of completion of school is very low, and even many of them do not start education because of their families' decisions (Sakız & Woods, 2014). Moreover, according to the monitoring report of ERG (2021), there is a huge gap (approximately %20) in the gender distribution of students who are taking special education. The same report also indicates that the inclusion method applied to students' rates is %75,1. Even though it seems a promising proportion, ERG claims that this inclusion method should be applied to all students with disabilities except in exceptional cases. (Even in exceptional cases, this should be temporary to eliminate that exceptional case). The bad news about the report is that the inclusion method rate has not increased in recent years.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, education is a key component for the development of a country. To achieve an efficient education level, providing equality in accessing quality education is crucial. For a well-educated society, education should spread to all layers of society. Türkiye has been relatively successful in this regard with its implemented policies. At the same time, another condition of a well-educated society is the provision of educational equality. In this way, all layers of society can use the opportunities provided to reach their potential. Thus, the disconnection between the individuals in the society decreases, and a healthy society emerges. At this point, there are some concerns about education equality in Türkiye. The increasing rate of private schools has a negative effect on equality among students. On the other hand, the difference in opportunities between rural areas and cities affects the quality of education. Moreover, the negative attitude of families in rural areas may hinder the education of girls. In addition, the education rates of children with disabilities were found to be relatively low. As a result, poverty, gender, and disability are the categories in which problem situations accumulate in terms of education inequality.

Considering the differences in educational outcomes between students from low and high socioeconomic levels in Turkey, it can be said that poverty is an important sub-vulnerability. The data revealed by PISA tests on this subject demonstrate the need to support students from low socioeconomic levels in education policies in Turkey. In addition, the fact that the schooling rate in the West of Turkey is higher than in the East reveals regional differences. Considering that the rates achieved in the West cannot be achieved in the East, it shows the importance of more investment in the Eastern region. Any need that cannot be adequately met regarding socioeconomic level and regional differences tends to grow and return as a bigger problem. In this sense, the digital gap caused some students in Turkey to be unable to access EBA during the COVID-19 period, and their education was disrupted due to the lack of technological devices. Since education becomes digital in crises such as pandemics and earthquakes and digital platforms are needed, delivering digital tools and equipment to students who do not have the means should be considered a vital policy practice. Thus, adequate support for students from families with low socioeconomic status and regions with low opportunities is a prerequisite for the equal sustainability of education.

Türkiye has proceeded some steps forward from its starting point, but inequalities regarding economic conditions are still on the table. The covid-19 pandemic has also become another blow, especially by means of a poorer population. In gender equality, even though it seems there are promising numbers, especially for low-income segments of the population, the situation is not promising. The chronic problems regarding the education of girls in rural areas continue, so there is still a gap in terms of gender discrimination. Lastly, in terms of students with disabilities, there is an assumption of active inequalities by scholars because no verified data is available. It seems it is important to share verified data to understand the issue better and fix it if needed. Moreover, even though numbers are not at a low rate on disability inclusion methods in education, this method should cover all students with disabilities. Also, the merging of different intersections is creating increasing inequalities like girls with disabilities in education. Thus, poverty, gender discrimination, and disability are the main problems that should be focused on in terms of education inequality in the education system in Türkiye. It would be helpful for future studies to specifically examine intersectional categories where different vulnerabilities converge, such as being disabled and coming from a low socioeconomic background. In addition to studies examining educational inequality in a single category, it is an important effort to evaluate categories where several different vulnerabilities come together regarding

educational outcomes. When increasing inclusiveness in education in the general student population, vulnerable groups should always be taken into account. Otherwise, these groups will face the risk of further marginalization and isolation from education and, therefore, from society.

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