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Analysis of Education Transition Dynamics in Hong Kong, Finland, Russia and Türkiye

Songül Eryaşar¹

Abstract

The aim of the study is to analyze the transition systems between educational levels in Hong Kong and Finland, whose success rates have not decreased since they participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and in Russia and Turkey, which generally remain below the average success rate. The transition system between educational levels, which plays a key role in ensuring continuity and equality in education, is shaped according to the countries' unique educational policies and systems. The screening model was used in the study. The study's main sources of data are public documents like laws, rules, and generalizations about the education systems of the countries that were mentioned and how they move from one level to the next. It also uses documents from groups that look at and compare education systems, such as the OECD, World Bank, Eurydice, and the European Commission, as well as studies that are related to these countries. Within this framework, the data in the study were scanned from relevant sources, described, and compared. The "document analysis" technique was also applied in the analysis of the data. The education systems and transition systems between educational levels in Hong Kong, Finland, Russia and Turkey are discussed based on documents and sources. Education in Turkey and Russia is more based on academic and theoretical foundations. The education systems of Hong Kong and Finland are based more on learning by experiencing different experiences and perspectives. Although there are differences in the transition process from general education to high school education, the completion of undergraduate education is the main point of transition to graduate education; however, the admission requirements may vary in terms of the purpose and process of graduate education.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Education Systems, Transitions Between Educational Levels, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), The Screening Model, Document Analysis.

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2026, 15 (2), 841-861 | Research Article

Hong Kong, Finlandiya, Rusya ve Türkiye’deki Eğitim Kademeleri Arası Geçiş Dinamiklerinin Analizi

Songül Eryaşar¹

Öz

Çalışma Hong Kong, Finlandiya, Rusya ve Türkiye’nin eğitim kademeleri arasındaki geçiş sistemlerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Hong ve Finlandiya Uluslararası Öğrenci Değerlendirme Programı (PISA) sınavlarında başarı oranını düşürmeyen ülkelerken, Rusya ve Türkiye genellikle ortalamanın altında kalmaktadır. Eğitimde sürekliliğin ve eşitliğin sağlanmasında anahtar rol oynayan eğitim kademeleri arasındaki geçiş sistemi, ülkelerin kendine özgü eğitim politikaları ve sistemlerine göre şekillenmektedir. Çalışmada kademeler arası geçiş süreçlerinin kavranması için tarama modeli ve belge analizi yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Veriler her ülkenin eğitim sistemine dair yasal belgeler, düzenlemeler, uluslararası kurumların raporları vb. kamuya açık belgelerden elde edilmiştir. Bununla birlikte OECD, Dünya Bankası, Eurydice ve Avrupa Komisyonu gibi eğitim sistemlerini inceleyen ve karşılaştıran kuruluşların raporlarına ve bu ülkelerle ilgili çalışmalara başvurulmuştur. Bu çerçevede, çalışmadaki veriler ilgili kaynaklardan taranmış, betimlenmiş ve karşılaştırılmıştır. Verilerin analizinde “belge analizi” tekniği kullanılmıştır. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre Türkiye ve Rusya’daki eğitim daha çok akademik teoriye dayanırken Hong Kong ve Finlandiya eğitim sistemleri daha çok farklı deneyimler ve bakış açıları deneyimleyerek öğrenmeye dayanmaktadır. Okula başlama yaşı Hong ve Finlandiya’da 7 iken, Rusya ve Türkiye’de 6’dır. Finlandiya ve Hong Kong’da ekonomik gelişim ve iş gücü piyasasının talepleri doğrultusunda mesleki eğitime geçişte değerlendirme ölçütlerinin kaldırılması teknik eleman ihtiyacının giderilmesini için etkili bir stratejidir. Rusya’nın esnek mesleki eğitim yapısı, sunduğu birden fazla seçenekle güçlü bir yapı sergilemektedir. Ancak Türkiye’de mesleki eğitimin deneyim, teknoloji okuryazarlığı ve iş dünyasına uyum vb. gelişime açık yönleri bulunmaktadır. Sonuç olarak ülkelerin eğitim politikalarında ortak çaba göstermeleri ve eğitim kalitesini arttırmaları gerekmektedir. Bu noktada PISA başarısının yanında bireyin yaşam boyu öğrenme yolculuğunun da desteklenmesi önem arz etmektedir.

Keywords: Eğitim Sistemleri, Kademeler Arası Geçiş, Uluslararası Öğrenci Değerlendirme Programı (PISA), Tarama Modeli, Belge Analizi.

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Introduction

Factors such as the need to examine the success of education systems at the international level with globalization, the fact that a strong education system brings with it a highly qualified workforce, etc., have made it necessary for countries to attach more importance to research and development activities and to benefit from favorable examples in the international arena (benchmarking). Comparative education research plays an important role in the development of education systems has led organizations such as the World Bank, UNESCO, and the European Commission to initiate studies that compare education systems. Therefore, international organizations guide countries in developing effective education policies and improving their education systems (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2023a, p. 15-18).

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), implemented by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) plays a key role in comparing education systems at the international level. PISA is an exam conducted every three years with the participation of students from approximately 81 different countries to evaluate the knowledge and skills of students in the 15-year age group (OECD, 2023a, p. 112). Comparisons of educational performance based on the PISA exam enable the identification of areas of improvement in countries' education systems and contribute to the development of effective restructuring policies. Therefore, numerous studies have compared the education systems of countries based on PISA data (Agasisti and Zoido, 2018, p. 352-362; Aşıcı and Dede, 2022, p. 712-734; Aydın, Sarier, and Uysal, 2014, p. 1065–1074; Aydın, Selvitopu, and Kaya, 2018, p. 1283-1301; Bi, 2018, p. 98-119; Bieber, Niemann, and Martens, 2014, p. 16-34; Cabural, 2024, p. 46-57; Jerrim and Wyness, 2016, p. 208-231; Nasırcı and Kerkez, 2023, p. 367-386; Özerbaş and Safi, 2022, p. 1960–1992; Özmusul and Kaya, 2014, p. 23-31; Tertemiz and Koç Aytakin, 2018, p. 103-128).

In the literature, there are studies examining student achievement (Aydın, Sarier, and Uysal, 2014, p. 1065–1074), the learning process (Aşıcı and Dede, 2022, p. 712-734), school efficiency (Agasisti and Zoido, 2018, p. 352), educational investments (Aydın, Selvitopu, and Kaya, 2018, p. 1283), and the adopted educational management approach (Bieber, Niemann, and Martens, 2014, p. 16) based on the PISA exam. Additionally, studies are being conducted examining the reasons for countries' failure in the PISA exam (Cabural, 2024, p. 46) and the differences in achievement levels over the years (Jerrim and Wyness, 2016, p. 208; Özmusul and Kaya, 2014, p. 23; Tertemiz and Koç Aytakin, 2018, p. 103). Additionally, studies comparing Turkey with countries that have been successful in PISA (Nasırcı and Kerkez, 2023, p. 367; Özerbaş and Safi, 2022, p. 1960) are also being conducted. As can be seen, PISA-focused studies reveal the education system at different levels and perspectives.

Comparative studies are meaningful in terms of seeing how similar things that are not similar to each other really are or determining how different things that are very similar to each other really are and showing the degree of change in something (Balci, 2009, p. 23-25). Such comparisons offer insights into the similarities and differences between countries' education systems, as well as how success is achieved and sustained. Strong societal commitment, implementation capacity, and consensus play a central role in the sustainability of public policies (OECD, 2025, p. 20-25). Sustainable transformation in education is characterized by access and equity, labor market-compatible learning outcomes, and data-driven and transparent governance (European Commission, 2020, p.

12-20; OECD, 2019, p. 3-10; UNESCO, 2021, p. 6). In this context, the aim of this research is to examine and compare the education and inter-level transition systems of Hong Kong and Finland, which consistently perform well in the PISA exam, and Russia and Turkey, whose performance is generally below average, within the context of sustainable transformation in education.

Method

The methodological framework of the study is structured under the headings of research model, study group, data collection, and data analysis.

1. Research Model

The methodological framework of the study is structured under the headings of research design, scope of the study, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethics. This study is designed as a qualitative comparative document analysis. The purpose of the study is to describe and compare the transition systems between educational levels in Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey. First, the existing structures of transition systems in each country are systematically described. Subsequently, similarities and differences across cases are examined through comparative interpretation.

This study is situated within the methodological framework of comparative education research and adopts a comparative document analysis approach. The analysis relies exclusively on documentary sources to examine education systems and transition mechanisms across countries. Official policy documents, international assessment reports, and publicly available institutional publications constitute the primary data sources of the study. This approach is widely recognized in comparative education research as a systematic and legitimate method for analyzing educational structures, policies, and system-level processes (Bray, Adamson, & Mason, 2007, p. 45; Bowen, 2009, p. 35; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014, p.45-47).

2. Study Group

In this study, the criterion sampling method, which allows working with situations that meet a predetermined set of criteria from purposeful sampling methods, to determine the sample (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2005, p.112) was used. In this context, the study group of the research consists of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey, which regularly participate in PISA assessments and have clearly defined and comparable transition systems between educational levels.

Data were collected through document analysis, involving the systematic examination of publicly available written materials. Documents were selected according to the following criteria:

- Official status (laws, regulations, ministerial directives, or authorized policy reports),
- Direct relevance to the structure of the education system or transition mechanisms between educational levels,
- Publication by national education authorities or internationally recognized organizations, and

- Currency, with priority given to the most recent versions unless earlier documents were necessary to explain structural continuity.
- The documents analyzed included national education laws and regulations, official ministry publications, and international comparative reports addressing education systems and transition policies.

3. Collection of Data

Document evaluation, a qualitative research method, was used to gather the research data. In qualitative research, document analysis is the systematic examination of documents. In this study, it was first decided to examine the data using the document analysis method, as appropriate to the research topic. Then, the originality of the documents was checked. Finally, the documents were analyzed through content analysis.

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive and comparative analytical approach grounded directly in the content of the analyzed documents. Relevant information was extracted through close reading of how education system structures and transition mechanisms between educational levels were explicitly defined within official documents.

The extracted information was then systematically organized in narrative form and compared across countries by aligning document-based descriptions of education system characteristics and transition processes. This approach enabled clear and transparent cross-national comparison based solely on documented policy structures.

5. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this study was addressed through strategies aimed at ensuring dependability and confirmability, consistent with qualitative research principles. Since the analysis relied exclusively on publicly available official documents, the primary approach to trustworthiness was based on transparency and replicability of the analytic process.

To support dependability, all documents included in the analysis were selected according to clearly defined inclusion criteria, and the analytical focus was limited to information explicitly stated in the documents. Education system structures and transition mechanisms were described using the original terminology and regulatory definitions presented in official sources, minimizing researcher interpretation beyond the documented content.

Findings

The findings of the research are presented under two separate headings: the basic characteristics of the education systems of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia and Turkey, and the transition processes between levels in Hong Kong, Finland, Russia and Turkey. Basic Characteristics of the Education Systems of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia and Turkey.

The education systems of countries are affected by historical factors in terms of their general characteristics. Hong Kong and Finland carry the characteristics of the education

systems of the countries they were colonies of for many years. The similarity of the entrance exam to the second level of secondary education in Hong Kong with its equivalent in the British Education System and the continuing dominance of English in this country's education programs show the influence of the British Education System on the Hong Kong education system (Mok and Cheung, 2011, p. 232).

In 1997, Hong Kong changed the language of instruction from English to Chinese without consulting stakeholders, despite the objection of many parents on the grounds of rebuilding national identity, the right to education in the mother tongue, and ensuring equal opportunities. There are views that Chinese facilitates access to education for local students; however, it has eliminated the competitive advantage of English in the international arena (Yan and Brown, 2021, p. 2; Zeng, 2007, p. 50). The change in the language of instruction in Hong Kong, which was implemented without adopting a transparent governance approach, ensures access and equality but makes it difficult to meet the labor market's need for human resources proficient in a foreign language.

With the Inclusive School Reform, which was implemented in Finland in 1970, equality of opportunity was strengthened by standardizing educational programs. Within the scope of the reform, learning supports were increased and the impact of socio-economic status on educational life was minimized. The Finnish education system is based on collaborations established between public institutions and organizations and the private sector with schools, and education policies are evaluated by studies such as PISA. It is based on data regularly collected from international sources (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018; Sahlberg, 2011, p. 20; Simola, 2005, p. 456-462). In this framework, it is seen that Finland carries out its education reforms in line with the principles of access and equality, compatibility with labor markets, data-based and transparent governance, and ensuring sustainability.

Westernization policies in the 18th century and modernization efforts in the 19th century were effective in shaping the Russian education system (Özberk, 2021, p. 453-455). During this period, the selective education system—specifically for the nobility—was expanded to encompass all segments of society, and vocational schools and polytechnics were expanded, focusing on improving the quality of the workforce. However, in Russia, where bureaucratic and authoritarian governance prevails, decisions are made centrally and are passed down from the top (Brooks, 2011, p. 62-66; Eklof, 1990, p. 24). Consequently, while strong steps have been taken in the Russian education system to ensure access, equality, and compatibility with labor markets, practices remain far removed from a governance approach.

Among the historical turning points that were effective in the Turkish education system are the closure of madrasahs in 1924, the gathering of educational institutions under a single roof and the adoption of the Latin alphabet in 1928. Thus, the Turkish education system, with its standardized and measurable teaching processes, became universal, secular, and sustainable (Akyüz, 2020, p. 235-248). In the 1930s, Turkey pursued industrialization, and from the 1960s onwards, it aimed to train qualified human resources to meet the needs of the labor market within the scope of the national development plan (Doğan, 2005, p. 165). The Maarif Councils (1923, 1926, 1939) conducted in the early years of the Republic laid the foundation for a data-based planning culture in education (Kodal 2023, p. 178). However, due to the country's centralized and bureaucratic structure, education policies are implemented top-down through decisions

taken at the national level (Altemir, 2018, p. 440). Based on this, it is understood that steps have been taken in the Turkish education system to ensure access and equality, align with labor markets, and be data-driven; however, the governance culture has not become fully functional.

Considering the education systems of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey, Hong Kong, which prioritizes the preservation of national identity, has practices that facilitate equal access and opportunity but don't meet global labor market demands and fail to support stakeholder participation in decision-making processes. Finland largely ensures the sustainability of its educational reforms through its Inclusive School Reform, interactive vocational training system, and data-driven education policies. Russia, which has taken significant steps towards equal access to education and opportunity and established strong professional structures, hinders the sustainability of educational reforms with its centralized management approach. Turkey, on the other hand, has practices that support access and equality, labor market alignment, and a data-driven planning culture; however, due to its centralized structure, governance remains open to improvement. Therefore, Finland offers a guiding framework for indicators of sustainable transformation in education.

When the countries included in the study are examined in terms of educational objectives, Hong Kong and Finland have common general objectives, such as (1) discovering students' talents; (2) gaining students' perspectives based on the synthesis of East-West cultures; and (3) students' speaking English and their native language fluently (Adamson and Li Siu Pang, 2005, p. 48; Aksoy and Gözütok, 2014, p. 28; Apaydın, 2015, p. 258; Cheng, Cheung, and Ng, 2016, p. 29). The educational objectives of Hong Kong and Finland, aimed at unlocking students' potential, facilitate access and equality as well as adaptation to the labor market. The emphasis on the synthesis of East-West cultures is consistent with the principle of governance that considers cultural diversity (OECD, 2018, p. 7 – 16).

Russian education programs prioritize the freedom of personality development and aim to protect and develop national culture, regional traditions, and multinational state characteristics (UNESCO, 2023). The Turkish education program aims to support individual and social development and strengthen social values and cultural identity (Güler and Oğuz, 2013, p. 87; Korkmaz and Akbaş, 2017, p. 128). As can be seen, the educational programs in Russia and Turkey are similar in terms of their objectives. Although both countries emphasize inclusiveness focused on cultural and regional diversity, socio-economic inequalities, regional differences, and limited educational opportunities in some regions make equal opportunities difficult (World Bank, 2023, p. 7-12; Yorulmaz, 2024, p. 5). At this point, new educational opportunities focused on digital transformation are needed (Fullan & Gallagher, 2020, p. 58).

The specific objectives of countries' education programs vary according to the curriculum and school structure. For example, while a national framework education program is implemented in Finland, different education programs are implemented in Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2018; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018; Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation [NUFFIC], 2015). In this respect, Finland offers inclusive education that minimizes socioeconomic disparities, while Hong Kong rather promotes competitiveness (Cheng, 2009, p. 65; Sahlberg, 2011, p. 20).

In Russia, in addition to general schools, there are schools that implement intensive education programs in specific areas such as religion, science, sports, and music. However, in Russia, in addition to schools that provide education mainly in the humanities (gimnaziya), there are private schools that offer education in scientific and technical subjects (lyceum) (Nordic Recognition Network, 2005, p. 18). Similarly, in Turkey, in addition to general high schools, there are state and private schools that provide intensive education in the fields of science and technology, humanities and social sciences, religion, sports, and music. Educational processes conducted through different school types risk exacerbating socio-economic disparities. However, they are advantageous in that they cultivate human resources that meet the diverse needs of the labor market (OECD, 2021a, p. 13; OECD, 2022, p. 20). Based on this, it appears that education programs supported by different school types in Russia and Turkey are strong in producing outcomes aligned with labor market needs, but they also risk exacerbating socio-economic disparities.

The age at which children start compulsory education and the rules for transition between levels vary across the countries included in the study. In Hong Kong and Finland, students receive six years of primary school and then three years of upper secondary school to complete the nine-year compulsory education process. The age at which compulsory education starts in Hong Kong is six, and in Finland it is seven (Adamson & Li Siu Pang, 2005, p. 37; Marlow-Ferguson, 2002, p. 587; Yıldız, 2013, p. 82).

In Russia, 12 years of compulsory education consist of four years of primary education, five years of basic general education, and three years of secondary education. The age at which compulsory education starts in Russia and Turkey is six. In Turkey, 12 years of compulsory education consist of four years of primary school, four years of secondary school, and four years of high school (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024; Ministry of National Education of Turkey, 2024). General characteristics of the education systems of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey are given in Table 1.

Table 1. General Characteristics of the Education Systems of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey

Countries/ Autonomous Regions	School Structure	Curriculum	Compulsory Education	
			Starting Age	Duration
Hong Kong	State and Private	Multi programme	7 age	9 years
Finland	State	National	7 age	9 years
Russia	State and Private	Multi programme	6 age	12 years
Turkey	State and Private	Multi programme	6 years	12 years

Source: Adamson ve Li Siu Pang, 2005,p. 36 - 40; Education Bureau, 2018; Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018; Marlow-Ferguson, 2002, p. 587-589; Nordic Recognition Network, 2005; Yıldız, 2013, p. 63-84.

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that the school structures, education programs, compulsory education starting ages, and compulsory education durations of the four countries included in the study show differences. The school structures of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey are grouped as public and private schools, and a multi-program education program is implemented.

Students' success is influenced by the development of a positive attitude towards school and learning, rather than the age at which they start compulsory education, which is

determined according to their readiness for school life. Finland ensures that children maintain their inherent curiosity during the preschool period and become ready to learn (Sahlberg, 2011, p. 12-18). Due to the exam-focused nature of the Hong Kong education system, students who experience test anxiety as soon as they start school are supported with private lessons. This not only limits children's creativity, critical thinking, and self-regulation skills but also increases social stratification (Bray and Koo, 2004, p. 623; Mok and Cheung, 2011, p. 235; Yan and Brown, 2021, p. 5).

In Russia, compulsory education, which starts early (age 6), is conducted with an intensive curriculum focused on knowledge transfer, limiting autonomy and creativity. Similarly, in Turkey, the early age of starting compulsory education (age 6) makes it difficult for students, especially in rural areas, to adapt to school and negatively affects their academic achievement (OECD, 2021b, p. 442; Turan, 2016, p. 5). Turan (2016, p. 4-7) argues that the age of starting compulsory education in Turkey is pedagogically problematic, emphasizing that the practice was quickly enacted and implemented without sufficient discussion and that children's developmental readiness levels were ignored.

6. Transition Processes Between Levels in Hong Kong, Finland, Russia and Turkey

In the countries covered in the study, transitions between levels were discussed under four headings: (1) from kindergarten to primary education, (2) from primary education to secondary education, (3) from secondary education to higher education, and (4) from higher education to postgraduate education. To understand the transition systems between educational levels more clearly, the study included general information about the educational stages and transition rules of the countries, emphasizing their role in ensuring the sustainability of educational transformation.

6.1. Transition from Preschool to Compulsory Primary Education

The ages at which children start preschool education vary between countries. These differences arise from various factors, including cultural preferences for raising children at home (Aytaç & Özbilen, 2022, p. 90-93) and preschool education not being covered by the state. Among the countries included in the research, only in Finland is preschool education covering the ages of 0-6 (Eurydice, 2018) considered a preparation stage for primary education and is compulsory. In other countries, it is preferred by families to support the healthy development of the child (Niikko & Ugaste, 2012, p. 483; Öun, 2008, p. 40).

Families' socioeconomic status influences their decisions regarding preschool education; preschool education is particularly discouraged by families with low socioeconomic status living in rural areas (OECD, 2023b, p. 64). However, ensuring access and equality in preschool education is critical for inclusive and sustainable education (UNESCO, 2021, p. 41). Therefore, awareness campaigns regarding the importance of preschool education should be increased, and social policies that increase family participation should be implemented.

Different practices are encountered in the transition process from preschool to primary education in countries. In Hong Kong and Turkey, every child who reaches the age of 6, and in Finland and Russia, every child who reaches the age of 7, is accepted to basic

compulsory education (UNESCO, 2011, p. 11-18). However, in Finland, students have the right to start comprehensive basic education one year earlier if they pass psychological tests that measure their level of readiness (Office for Standards in Education, 2003, p. 50-52). In Hong Kong, Russia, and Turkey, the decision to start basic education early is left to the initiative of the family (Akyol, Erkoç, & Öztaban, 2024, p. 22; Ercantürk, 2010, p. 45). While allowing families to choose the school starting age enhances governance, basing the education process on each student's individual development promotes equality.

6.2. Transition from Compulsory Primary Education to Secondary Education

In Hong Kong, students have the opportunity to continue in non-formal vocational education courses after completing compulsory education (primary and lower secondary education) at the age of 15 (Adamson and Li Siu Pang, 2005, p. 48-51). These students are educated in free and full-time courses by the Vocational Training Council (VTC) (Educational Bureau, 2018). This practice, implemented in harmony and cooperation with the labor market, ensures students' academic and professional development. However, vocational education is perceived as an alternative for low-achieving students (Chan, 2025, p. 1).

In Finland, general and vocational secondary education options are available after compulsory primary education. The primary criterion for transition to secondary education is academic success, while work experience is also taken into account in vocational education (UNESCO, 2011, p. 7-9). Talent tests, hobbies, and other activities can be included in the assessment (Finnish National Agency, 2018). The diversity of transition criteria to secondary education indicates that students are subjected to competency-based assessment in addition to examinations; that the process is carried out with the principle of equality in mind, and that learning outcomes are compatible with the labor market.

In Russia, students who are successful in the final exam after compulsory basic education (at the age of 15) are given a certificate of completion that entitles them to move on to the next level. Secondary education consists of a five-year primary level and a two- to three-year secondary level. Schools that provide vocational and technical education offer the opportunity to complete compulsory education (UNESCO, 2011, p. 10-12). The transition system to secondary education in Russia indicates an exam-oriented, selective approach, and competency-based approaches are not implemented.

In Turkey, the transition from compulsory basic education to secondary education is made to general or imam hatip schools without an exam and without any prerequisites. In Turkey, the success of the second-level school and the proximity of the student's home to the school are decisive in the transition from basic compulsory education to secondary education, and the family makes the final decision (Aslan and Küçüker, 2010, p. 356; Küçüker, 2017, p. 56-58). While entrance to secondary education without entrance exams in Turkey strengthens access and equality, placement based on residential address undermines equal opportunity for those with low socioeconomic status. Furthermore, while leaving the final decision regarding secondary education to the family may be consistent with transparent governance, it reveals that decisions are not based on data.

6.3. Transition from Secondary Education to Higher Education (Undergraduate)

The general characteristics of the secondary education levels of the selected countries and the rules for transition to higher education levels are given below:

In Hong Kong, there is an opportunity to enter vocational education through an exam in the second stage of secondary education (Adamson and Li Siu Pang, 2005, p. 49). However, the majority of students continue their general education and take the Hong Kong Secondary Education Diploma Examination (HKDSE) in the final year (Education Bureau, 2016). As a result of the exam, students can continue in different departments of higher education that consist of general or vocational education options or prefer to take part in business life (Guo, 2009, p. 72). The opportunity to transition to vocational education offered in the second stage of secondary education facilitates students' adaptation to the labor market by enabling them to start working life early.

In Finland, secondary education institutions offer students general and vocational education opportunities. Students who complete their general secondary education program take the National Proficiency Examination and receive a "University Examination Certificate" that grants them the right to proceed to higher education. Vocational secondary education institutions offer educational programs that provide students with more professional qualifications and expertise (UNESCO, 2011, p. 9). At the end of the three-year vocational secondary education, a proficiency exam consisting of foreign language, science, elective courses, and a vocational course is taken, where knowledge and skills are assessed separately for each module (Moore, 2008, p. 24). The most commonly used assessment basis for transitioning to higher education is the National Proficiency Exam and entrance tests. However, due to limited quotas, universities and universities of applied sciences accept students according to different assessment principles (Finnish National Agency, 2018).

In Russia, the United State Examination (USE) exam is used for transition from secondary education to higher education. The USE aims to maintain general standards, reduce corruption and informality, and provide a chance for success for low-income or disabled students in rural areas (Nikoloev and Chugunov, 2012). However, some universities that Russia recognizes have special conditions in addition to the USE for student admission to universities (Nordic Recognition Network, 2005, p. 28-30). In addition, there are 3.5-year specialist technician and 1-year qualified professional education programs in Russia that are not within the scope of universities (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024).

In Turkey, transition to university is carried out through a central exam. The exam success score is calculated by adding the secondary school success score to the score obtained from the exam (Küçüker, 2017, p. 62). Although the examination system in Turkey strengthens access to higher education, differences in region, school type, etc. create inequality.

6.4. Transition from Undergraduate Education to Graduate Education

The general characteristics of the higher education levels of the selected countries and the rules for transitioning to graduate-level education are explained below:

Despite its complex structure, higher education in Hong Kong is highly selective and based on student competition. Those who complete their undergraduate studies or have an equivalent qualification are accepted to master's or doctoral programs (Guo, 2009, p. 88). University education in Finland consists of two terms: a three-year undergraduate and a two-year master's degree (Downes, 2005, p. 28). In Finland, it is necessary to go through a highly competitive process to become a primary school teacher. Primary and secondary school teachers complete their education at the master's level (Lavonen, Korhonen, & Juuti, 2015, p. 2066). The competitive and selective approach adopted by both Hong Kong and Finland in the transition from higher education to postgraduate studies carries the risk of increasing inequality due to socio-economic level, region, etc.

In Russia and Turkey, graduate education consists of a four-year undergraduate education followed by two years of master's and doctoral education. An entrance exam is applied for master's and doctoral education. At the end of each level, a diploma is awarded (Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, 2024). It is understood that the transition from higher education to postgraduate education in Russia and Turkey is exam-oriented.

The age of starting compulsory education in these countries varies between 6 and 7 years, and multi-program and national education programs are carried out. While the duration of compulsory education in Hong Kong and Finland is nine years, it is 12 years in Russia and Turkey. The age of starting compulsory education is 6 in Hong Kong and Turkey and 7 in Finland and Russia. There is no selection principle in the transition from pre-school education to basic education in all countries. However, in Finland, the student's readiness is taken into account. When the principles of transition from compulsory education to secondary education are considered in Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey, it is seen that there is no condition for transition to vocational education in Hong Kong; course success and professional work experience are taken as the basis in Finland; and there is an examination practice in Russia and Turkey.

In the countries studied, finishing undergraduate school is usually the first step to going to postgraduate school. However, the requirements for getting into postgraduate school, its purpose, and the way it works may be different. For example, while completion of undergraduate education is a sufficient condition for admission to start postgraduate education in Finland, Russia and Turkey, in Hong Kong, students are required to have a bachelor's degree or equivalent qualifications. Hong Kong's selective and competitive structure for transition to graduate education supports labor market integration, while Finland's access and equity-focused practices support academic mobility and lifelong learning. Russia and Turkey's centralized structures, on the other hand, undermine the data-driven and transparent governance necessary for institutional autonomy.

Differences in compulsory education starting age and transition criteria are shaped by countries' priorities regarding access and equity, labor market integration, and governance approaches. Finland and Hong Kong prioritize students' individual development and labor market integration through competency-based assessment. The use of various assessment tools that strengthen equality in Finland indicates sustainable education. However, the negative public perception of vocational education in Hong Kong poses a risk of failing to meet labor market needs. Russia's merit-based selective practices for transition between levels contradict access and equity principles, while Turkey's exam-free transition and placement-based placement practices undermine data-

driven governance. In this context, it is understood that socioeconomic level, regional differences, and management approaches are among the determining factors in educational sustainability. Therefore, transition systems between levels should be implemented with inclusive, competency-based, data-driven, and governance-based policies.

Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

This research has shed light on the relationship between sustainability and success in education by analyzing the transition systems between educational levels in Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey. According to the review, there are similarities between the education systems and transition principles of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey. These similarities are not sufficient on their own to explain the PISA success levels of these countries. However, it is possible to say that these common and different characteristics play an important role in the success of the education systems, their sustainability and their contribution and impact on economic development. However, sustainable success depends on each country developing unique, flexible, and contextually sensitive education policies tailored to its own societal, cultural, social, and economic structure.

Hong Kong and Finland serve as examples of the positive impact of socioeconomic factors on PISA scores. The early reforms implemented in these countries have strengthened educational equality and increased accessibility. Finland, which embraces education as a fundamental priority area of social development, has adopted a development-oriented and student-centered approach where the teacher plays a key role, rather than an exam-focused approach, and this approach has become ingrained in its social and administrative culture. The stakeholder-participatory structure of the Finnish education system facilitates taking stable steps that lead to a vision.

The Hong Kong education system, a blend of British colonial influences and East Asian culture, is structured around the deeply rooted cultural values of "diligence and work discipline." However, centralized decisions make it difficult to implement context-specific transformations within the Hong Kong education system. Therefore, it is necessary to create policy mechanisms in Hong Kong that support a strong work culture and are based on open communication.

Russia and Turkey, on the other hand, stand out as areas where improvement is needed. While strong steps have been taken in the Russian and Turkey education system to ensure access, equality, and compatibility with labor markets, practices remain far removed from a governance approach. In this context, it is important for Russia and Turkey to adopt an approach of open communication, accountability, and data-driven governance.

The fact that there is no selection requirement in the transition process from preschool to compulsory education in the transition systems of Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey is an indicator of the importance given to compulsory education. Compulsory education is an inevitable stage in terms of providing information for students to decide whether to continue their education at higher levels or to enter business life, as well as being a stage of basic citizenship education. In fact, education laws in Hong Kong, Finland, Russia, and Turkey all say that going to school is important (The Law of Turkish Primary Education and Education No 2; The Law of Russian Federal Education No 6; The Law of Hong Kong Education Ordinance Section No 24; The Law of Finnish Education

No 2). At this point, we should not overlook the need to strengthen compulsory education, not just as a legal obligation but as a fundamental policy area that reduces socio-economic inequalities.

Although there are differences between the countries in the transition from compulsory education to secondary education, common practices are encountered, especially in the transition to vocational education. For example, the absence of an evaluation principle in transitions from compulsory education to vocational education in Hong Kong and Finland can be interpreted as an encouragement to meet the need for technical personnel. In Russia, it is seen that after basic compulsory education (at the age of 15), different options are offered to train expert technicians and qualified personnel when compulsory education is completed (at the age of 17). However, although students' transition from compulsory education to vocational education is exam-free in the Turkish education system, the application does not achieve its purpose due to the preference of working in different fields after graduation. Therefore, updating secondary education programs to increase out-of-school experience and technology literacy is important for the sustainability of both education and economic development. At this point, teaching strategies should foster higher-level thinking and individualized learning that meets the student's unique needs (Balci, 2017, p. 178).

Transitions to vocational education should be supported at every level and various options should be created, and communication should be established with the business world that forms the school environment. Vocational education should be supported by student-centered career guidance and policies that strengthen public perception. Furthermore, vocational education programs should be updated to support out-of-school learning experiences and to impart 21st-century skills such as technological literacy; teaching strategies should support higher-order thinking skills and individualized learning.

Multiple assessment mechanisms that consider academic achievement, individual competence, and preferences should be established without eliminating the decisive role of centralized/standardized exams in the transition to higher education. Furthermore, we should implement policies to prevent inequality of opportunity caused by socio-economic and regional differences and create data-based guidance and counseling systems. In addition, collaborations that increase university-labor market interaction should be established to ensure that higher education becomes flexible and agile.

Transition processes to postgraduate education, conducted with selective, exam-oriented, and centralized management approaches, contain various access and equality risks stemming from socio-economic conditions, regional differences, and management structure. Therefore, the basic criteria for transition to postgraduate education should be academic potential, research skills, professional experience, etc. Furthermore, flexible options that facilitate the transition between academic and professional life should be created to support academic mobility and lifelong learning.

Sustainable transformation in education depends on a transparent, participatory, and data-driven governance approach, in addition to structural reforms. Decisions based on data such as student achievement, teacher qualifications, and school performance lead to effective and equitable practices. Furthermore, ensuring the active participation of education stakeholders in decision-making processes strengthens accountability.

Furthermore, learning outcomes aligned with labor market needs not only increase economic productivity but also reduce unemployment and support sustainable social well-being.

This study demonstrates that the principles of transition between levels alone are insufficient to explain success in PISA exams; education systems are shaped by the interaction between global trends and standards and local social, cultural, and administrative dynamics. Sustainable success in education depends on implementing globalized policies that take into account each country's unique social and socio-cultural structure, administrative processes, and cultural values while adapting to global requirements. Therefore, strengthening compulsory education as a policy area that reduces inequalities stemming from social and socio-cultural structures, supporting vocational education with integrated and flexible structures tailored to local workforce needs, and adopting multiple, data-driven, and governance-oriented assessment mechanisms for transition to higher and postgraduate education are highlighted. Based on the results, recommendations for policymakers, education administrators, and researchers have been developed. The recommendations for policymakers are as follows:

- Education policies should be implemented taking into account global criteria such as PISA, Bologna, and sustainability indicators; however, they should also be compatible with the unique social and socio-cultural structure, administrative processes, and cultural values of each country.
- National data systems monitoring student achievement, teacher quality, and school performance should be established, and international achievement comparisons should form the basis for policies adapting to global needs.
- A participatory governance model should be adopted that ensures the participation of all education stakeholders, including local government, schools, teachers, parents, students, and the private sector, in decision-making processes; inclusion in international innovation ecosystems should be ensured.
- Vocational education policies that do not ignore local and regional workforce needs and that provide the knowledge, skills, and equipment to meet global workforce demands should be implemented.

Recommendations developed for education administrators are as follows:

- Schools should prepare student achievement analyses, teacher development indicators, and performance reports; they should evaluate this data while considering national and international goals; and they should create improvement plans that take into account the social and economic characteristics of the school environment.
- The opinions of teachers, students, and parents should be regularly collected to strengthen school culture and form the basis for practices that are in line with global standards.
- Interaction between the school and its environment and the business world should be increased; students should be introduced to local production, employment, and professional life; students should be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and equipment that meet the needs of the global labor market.

- Each school should prepare its own strategic plan that considers its unique conditions and sustainability principles, and this plan should be implemented in alignment with global education goals.

Suggestions developed for researchers are as follows:

- Studies addressing sustainable transformation in education should be conducted based on the interaction between global policy trends and local practices.
- The alignment of learning outcomes with the labor market should be evaluated, taking into account local employment dynamics and global qualifications frameworks.
- Comparative studies should be conducted examining how national education policies are localized in line with sustainability indicators determined by international organizations.
- Qualitative and mixed-methods research addressing stakeholder participation, local governance processes, and the effects of global cultural factors in education policies should be increased.

Değerlendirme	İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme
Etik Beyan	Bu çalışma tarama modeliyle yürütüldüğü için etik kurul izni gerektirmemektedir. Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.
Yapay Zeka Beyanı (Yazar)	Bu çalışmanın hazırlanması sürecinde sınırlı ölçüde yapay zekâ araçlarından yararlanılmış olup, içerik, analiz, yorum ve sonuçlara ilişkin tüm akademik sorumluluk yazara aittir.
Yapay Zeka Beyanı (Dergi)	Bu çalışmanın hazırlanması sürecinde yapay zekâ araçlarının kullanıldığı yazar tarafından beyan edilmiştir. Yapay zekâ kullanılmış olmasından dolayı, çalışmanın bilimsel içeriği, analizleri ve sonuçlarına ilişkin tüm sorumluluk yazara aittir.
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