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arise Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education

ARISE

Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education

National Report for Turkey

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Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education

National Report for Turkey

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Contents

Introduction 5

General Policy Context Relevant for Equity 8

- Equity in national legislation and strategic documents 8
- Poverty as source of inequity 10

Equity in Education 12

Description of the current policy measures aimed at reducing inequity 16

Changes in recent years affecting equity in education 21

Key Conclusions and Recommendations 27

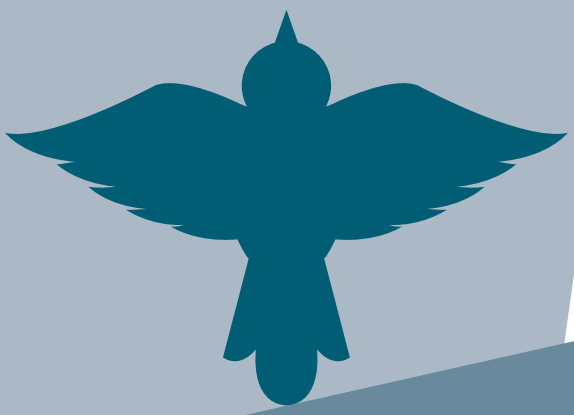
References 28

Introduction

The national report was created within the project Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education (ARISE[1]), a regional project implemented in Albania, Bosna and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey and funded by the European Commission. The project aims to support inclusion of students with low socio-economic status by building national and regional partnerships of civil society organisations from six aforementioned beneficiaries to engage in advocacy and constructive policy dialogue with governments, raise awareness among education stakeholders and pilot interventions targeting low SES students at the school level.

Data and information presented in the national report are collected through a policy questionnaire fulfilled after the analysis of equity-related policy documents and consultations with relevant institutions and experts and focus group and interviews with policy makers, school principals, teachers, school support staff, students, parents, civil society organisations and educational experts. Focus group and interviews are implemented to obtain stakeholders' perspective on equity-related issues in general and in the educational context of a country.

1 More information about project: https://www.arisenetwork.eu/en/



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General Policy Context Relevant for Equity

Equity in national legislation and strategic documents

Major national documents regarding education and training in Turkey include; the Constitution, the Presidential Program, the Presidency Annual Program, the Presidential Education and Education Policy Board proposals, New Economy Program (YEP) in accordance with the Medium-Term Program, Turkey's Education Vision 2023 in addition to a number of development and strategic plans. Legal and official documents, stress commitment to achieving equality besides ensuring an equitable approach to citizens. As stated in the Constitution, this commitment to equality is to remain irrespective of "language, race, color, sex, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion, and sect".[2] Founded in 2012 in line with this commitment, the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Turkey, aims to combat "discrimination against exercising rights and freedoms" while protecting and improving human rights' conditions in Turkey.[3]

The Basic Law of National Education underlines the importance of generality and equality in education, thus forbidding educational institutions from granting privileges to any specific people or groups in order to ensure access to education for all children and to prevent any discrimination based on language, race, sex, disability, or religion.[4] In terms of the effect of SES on education, a report, issued within the scope of Turkey's Eleventh Development Plan (2019–2023), acknowledges that a family's socio-economic status (SES onwards) constitutes a significant determinant for the quality and nature of

2 Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, Article 10.
3 Law on Human Rights and Equality Institution of Turkey, Article 1.
4 Basic Law of National Education, Article 4.

education to be received by a child. For that reason, the report sees the education system as crucial to both increasing the capabilities of children and creating opportunities for upward social and economic mobility.[5]

However, the legal framework set in the legal and official documents has been overwhelmingly questioned by the participants of the focus group on the grounds that it does not produce any regulatory enforcement practices for achieving equity and therefore the legal framework remains on paper only, lacking sufficient implementation. Instead, the measures taken by the state to cope with inequity are blind to differences among certain groups and individuals as well as their needs. As mentioned in the focus group, "the state tries to make the most inaccessible and excluded groups look like the established template on its mind" and does not leave any room for differences. Similarly, the state's single approach to differences is also visible in school types. On the differences in rural and urban areas, one of the participants asserts that formal education in Turkey, from curriculum to teachers' education, is planned in accordance with schools in urban areas and therefore overlooks the needs of the schools in villages.[6] Moreover, almost all participants in the focus group agree that discrimination against minority, refugee, and migrant children remains the greatest obstacle to ensuring equity within the society as well as hindering access to education.

The legislation concerning the principle of non-discrimination within the Turkish legal system is considered on par with the international standards. However, there is a need for increased legal literacy skills among civil servants and practitioners, besides a need for strengthening the monitoring, inspection, and enforcement mechanisms regarding the execution of the parties' duties and responsibilities outlined in the legal documents.

A commonly agreed definition for socioeconomic status does not exist, thus the definition of "low socio-economic background" varies depending on the approach pursued.[7] Having said that, SES is commonly understood in relation to family income, education level, and

5 Specialization Commission's Report of the Working Group on Children under Turkey's Eleventh Development Plan (2019–2023).

6 Focus Group.

7 An alternative set of indicators for socio-economic status can be found in Şener et al., 2014, p. 30. For a discussion on SES indicators, see Kalaycıoğlu et al., 2010. For a discussion on various approaches defining and determining SES, see Sunar, n.d.

occupation.[8] The Specialization Commission's Report of the Working Group on Children under Turkey's Eleventh Development Plan (2019–2023) adopts a well-being framework for children.[9] Within this well-being framework, education continues to be a crucial element while education systems are expected to increase the capabilities of children of all ages in addition to creating opportunities for upward social and economic mobility. The report states that a family's SES persists as the most significant determinant for the quality and nature of the education to be received by a child. Needless to say, the education level of the parents affects their participation in the labor force, the family income, and the resources at home that would eventually enable the children to succeed in school.

Another factor that weighs on the families' SES is the migration status. Turkey is currently home to over 4 million refugees and migrants, according to the data from the official records. Families with a migration background are more likely to experience poverty, which in turn can be easily exacerbated through language barriers and discrimination. Apart from low SES and migration background, sex/gender, household size, differences between regions and urban/rural differences also have an impact on children's participation in education.[10] Ability/disability, age, gender, race, ethnicity, and language can be used as a basis for discrimination and exclusion.[11] On a similar note, poverty is associated with the following groups: refugees and migrants, Roma community, individuals whose native language is different from Turkish, people with disabilities, women, seasonal agricultural workers, and juveniles pushed to crime.

Poverty as source of inequity

The Turkish Statistical Institute (TSI) defines poverty as a "state where people are unable to afford their basic needs" and breaks poverty down into two levels, namely "narrow" and "broad".[12] The

8 Dinçer & Oral, 2013.

9 Kalkınma Bakanlığı, 2018.

10 Ibid. For geographical and urban/rural differences, see also Buğra & Yılmaz, 2016 and for the living conditions survey, see TSI, 11 September 2020.

11 Çayır & Ayan, 2012. Additionally, inclusion is seen as an area where improvement is needed according to the Turkey Report for 2019 that is prepared by the European Union, see European Commission, 29 May 2019.

12 TSI, 11 September 2020.

narrow level "includes dying from hunger" whereas, in the latter, "poverty indicates being economically behind the majority of the society although one might be able to afford basic needs to survive such as food, clothing, and shelter."[13] To assess the poverty rate, the TSI uses poverty thresholds calculated on the basis of different percentages (i.e. 40%, 50%, 60%, and 70%) of the median equivalized income. 60% of median equivalized household disposable income defines the "at-risk-of-poverty-rate", and is widely used as an indicator to show the relative poverty in Turkey. In 2019, those that fell into this category rose by 0.1 points compared to 2018, reaching an overall rate of 21.3%.[14]

As for the indexes that measure income inequality such as the S80/20 ratio comparing the total income of the richest 20% percent with the poorest 20% of the population, it declined from 7.8 to 7.4 from 2018 to 2019. Nevertheless, the relatively more equal results in 2019 do not mean that people with low SES were doing far better than the last year. Between 2018 and 2019, the relative poverty rate below 40% of the median income rose by 0.4 points to 8.3%; the relative poverty rate below 50% of the median income rose by 0.5 points to 14.4%; the relative poverty rate below 60% of the median income rose by 0.1 points to 21.3% while the relative poverty rate below 70% of the median income stayed at 28.5%.[15]

The public opinion about the equal income distribution in Turkey tells a different story marked by a stratified belief. In an academic study, Kalaycıoğlu and Çarkoğlu point out that on the one hand, the general public tends to associate poverty with metaphysical concepts such as misfortune. On the other hand, wealth is commonly viewed as a result of interpersonal relationships, clientelism patronage, and unjust enrichment as opposed to an achievement obtained through personal efforts, endeavor, and success. The view that the wealthy people have got rich due to their skills and success, and that the poor are poor due to their lazy character and lack of effort on their part appears to be rather uncommon.[16]

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Kalaycıoğlu & Çarkoğlu, 2020.

Equity in Education

With a score of 67% in social inclusion, Turkey ranks 59th out of 78 countries participating in PISA.[17] This low score in social inclusion shows that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend the same schools. In return, this generates an immediate stratification among schools based on class and educational achievement.[18] The index of variation in students' ESCS between schools yields remarkable results regarding the students from different socio-economic backgrounds at schools. Turkey scored 0.46 in 2018 on this index, in which the value "0" reflects a heterogeneous environment in schools, and the value "1" reflects the opposite.[19] Another indicator, namely variation in students' ESCS within schools, draws a clearer picture regarding this stratification. Turkey's score on this index stands at 0.94, therefore, showing how students stack up in the same schools in accordance with their socio-economic backgrounds.[20] This stratification above also has a direct impact on the contribution of school-parent associations. In schools with low-SES students, parents are not able to financially support the Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA), which are responsible for hiring the non-educational support staff whenever the staff recruited and provided by the MoNE are unable to meet the needs of the school. PTAs also help organizing and financially supporting extracurricular activities at schools. In other words, when students from similar socio-economic backgrounds stack up in certain schools, this directly reflects on the financial contributions made by parents to meet a schools' needs.

Apart from the TIMSS and PISA results, the leading sources used to display regional differences include the Monitoring and Evalua-

17 PISA, n.d.
18 Ibid.
19 Korlu, 2019.
20 MoNE & Ministry of Industry and Technology, 2018.

tion of Academic Achievement (ABIDE in Turkish) and the Student Achievement Monitoring Study (OBA in Turkish) conducted by the MoNE. According to the results from TIMSS 2019 on the 8th graders, Southeast Turkey has the lowest average in Mathematics performance with a score of 461, whereas East Marmara has the highest performance in Mathematics with an average of 511.[21] The findings from these assessments prove that the top level of students that scored at or below the basic level in all academic areas was from Southeast Anatolia, Central East Anatolia, and Northeast Anatolia respectively.[22] It is not that striking to see that these three regions, respectively, account for the lowest three scores as far as mean household disposable income is concerned.[23] However, economic conditions shed light on only one side of the story. Published in 2018, a recent research emphasizes the frequent rotation of teachers in Southeast Anatolia. In 2017, a total of 114,991 personnel were working in the region. In the very same year, 15,391 teachers constituting more than 10% of the entire personnel asked for a reappointment somewhere else and left the region eventually. In return, merely 6,206 personnel were appointed to Southeast Anatolia to cover for these considerable shortcomings in the number of personnel.[24] Moreover, there is a remarkable difference between average service years of teachers in Southeast Anatolia and other regions in Turkey, which also gives some hints about the frequent teacher rotation. The average year of service for teachers in Southeast Anatolia region was 3.2 years whereas the overall average of the country stands at 3.9 years, which is 0.7 years higher than the region. In other words, teachers in Southeast Anatolia spend less time in service in the region when compared with the average of Turkey. Likewise, the average experience year of teachers stands at 4.1 years in Southeast Anatolia whereas Turkey's overall average score remains 5.7 years. For instance, in 2017, 27.1% of all the teachers in Southeast Anatolia were in their first three years of service, whereas this rate was only 5.6% in the Aegean and Mediterranean regions.[25] To overcome the above-mentioned problem, beginning

21 MoNE, 2020.
22 See ERI, 2019a.
23 TSI, 2019.
24 MoNE & Ministry of Industry and Technology, 2018.
25 Ibid.

from 2016 September, the MoNE introduced "contracted teachers" program, which forces newly appointed teachers to work under contracts with fewer rights in comparison to permanent teachers– for the first three years, after which they get to become a permanent teacher in their fourth year. In these four years, these teachers are not granted the right to request to be appointed to somewhere else.[26] Although the MoNE does not share figures regarding where these contracted teachers are appointed,[27] the high intensification of teachers in the first three years of service in Southeast Anatolia implies that the MoNE seeks to fill this personnel gap through appointing less experienced teachers in their first year of service.

Focus group participants agree with the previous data and argue that frequent rotation of teachers constitutes the most important problem for the education system in Turkey, the current education system fails to make the region attractive for teachers by not offering them financial compensation benefits, unlike other civil servants. Under the current structure, the only incentive available for the teachers working in the economically less developed regions is that they get to increase their service points at a higher rate than the other teachers working in the more developed regions of Turkey.[28]

Following the administrative factors that lead to inequality in education and differences in schools, there is also a need to look at school-level factors creating and reproducing inequality. The MoNE conducted an inclusive education project with a view to increasing the awareness of teachers for children with low SES, refugee backgrounds, disabilities, and experiences of violence.[29] Nevertheless, the respondents in the focus groups and interviews have questioned the success of such projects on the ground that children from low SES backgrounds, including refugee children and children with disabilities, continue to experience exclusion and discrimination at schools. Therefore, evaluation programs are required both for teachers and for the impact from these projects so as to understand the extent of the projects' successful implementation at schools besides their internalization by the teachers.

26 ERI, 2019b.
27 Ibid.
28 MoNE, 17 April 2015.
29 MoNE, 14 September 2018.

The absence of a rights-based framework for delivering aid to the children in need may lead to exclusion of the children with low SES in a classroom setting. One of the respondents, a teacher, has explained that a parent with a child receiving material aid from teachers complained to the teacher on the ground that his/her child is not given enough speech time in the classroom. In return, the teacher got furious and took back the material aid given to the child in front of his/her peers.[30] On the other hand, even in a rights-based and programmatic aid program such as the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (the CCTE), some decisions are left at the discretion of school principals. During the focus group study, three different respondents have mentioned that some school principals are reluctant to see these students (refugee and minority children) in their schools, and thus offered to provide them with the required documents for the financial aid for the CCTE in the hope that they would not attend school in person.[31] Since regular attendance to school is a must for being able to receive the monthly payment under the CCTE scheme, as explicated in the focus group, in some instances, manipulating attendance sheets is used as a method to make it seem as if the beneficiary students keep attending school regularly despite the fact that they fail to attend their schools regularly, or in some cases do not show up at school at all.

Another point risen during the focus group has been about scholarships and aids distributed to the low SES students. One of the participants has argued that these financial scholarships and aids are generally intensified in resilient students with low SES. Therefore, those children with low SES that are not deemed successful enough in standardized tests are excluded from benefiting from this financial support.[32] All participants have agreed that a new framework for the children on the brink of dropping out is required so as to keep the less successful children in the education system.[33]

30 Interview.
31 Raised in the focus group.
32 Raised in the focus group.
33 Raised in the focus group.

Description of the current policy measures aimed at reducing inequity

To ensure the access of low SES students and those with special needs to school, the MoNE implements several educational assistance programs. In the academic year of 2019–2010, 16,658,076 students were enrolled in formal education at all levels, excluding open and tertiary educational institutions; 1,152,520 out of the above-mentioned students benefited from transportation services and free school meals;[34] 278,896 students at the primary and secondary level received a monthly scholarship of 307.3 TRY; 328,141 boarding students received support for accommodation, allowance, clothing, and stationery.[35] Similar financial and material support as well as transportation services are also provided for Syrian students within the scope of the project, namely PIKTES.[36] In addition to financial support, the MoNE also developed other programs such as Education Support Programs, Remedial Education Program, Orientation/Compliance Classes, in addition to Support and Education Courses.

Since 2009, the MoNE has conducted seven different Education Support Programs, targeting students with several disabilities. These programs include those students with physical disabilities, language and speech disorders, visual disabilities, hearing disabil-

34 Currently, all students, regardless of economic conditions, who are eligible for free transportation and boarding services receive free school meals. A subsidized category for free school meals without benefitting from transportation and boarding services does not exist.

35 MoNE, 2020b.

36 PIKTES stands for Project on Promoting the Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System. For more information in Turkish, see: https://piktes.gov.tr/Home/ProjeninCiktisiENG

ities, special learning difficulties, pervasive developmental disorders, and intellectual disabilities. Having said that, as a recent report mentions,[37] "these programs remained rather elementary, and that the same outcomes were constantly repeated, particularly for the visually impaired high school students". In this scheme, Counselling and Research Centers remain the key institution under the MoNE for the identification and evaluation of the children with special needs and disabilities as well as for the placement of these children accordingly.[38]

The Remedial Education Program was firstly implemented nationwide in the 2018–2019 academic year. Available for both Turkish and refugee children, the program aims to improve the basic literacy and numeracy skills of the 3rd graders.[39] First implemented in 2019, the Orientation/Compliance Classes seek to enhance children's Turkish language proficiency as well as improving the integration of Syrian children with the education system.[40] Because the official language of instruction remains Turkish, depending on the need for language support, students are referred to orientation classes for one or two semesters and are then transferred back following the completion of their orientation classes.

Support and Education Courses are operated by school administrations and are overseen by the MoNE. Students in the 7th, 8th, 11th, and 12th grades from lower and upper secondary schools, as well as the graduates of formal and open educational institutions, can be enrolled in these courses.[41] Support and Education Courses were offered on a wide range of subjects from English to Music until the 2020–2021 academic year. However, the Court of Accounts criticized the range of courses being so wide, stating that the primary objective of these courses was the preparation for the entrance exams for upper secondary schools and universities.[42] Following the 2020–2021 academic year, it is expected that the range of courses will be narrowed down to only include courses relevant for the entrance exams.[43] Students will select courses based on their needs. Neither

37 Sart et al., 2016.
38 Special Education Services Regulation (SESR), Article 7.
39 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family and Social Policy, 2017; ERI, 2018.
40 MoNE, 2019c.
41 MoNE, 2020a.
42 Court of Accounts, 2020.
43 MoNE, 2020a.

the students nor their parents are required to make any financial contributions for these courses while the teachers receive additional service points as well as financial contributions.[44] Field data shows that the teachers regard these courses as beneficial and crucial for the low SES students in the preparation process for their entrance exams.

According to Education at a Glance 2019, Turkey stands out for its lowest proportion of public resources allocated to educational institutions in comparison to the OECD and other countries in the analysis.[45] In spite of this fact, educational institutions' spending is overwhelmingly funded by the public resources that constitute 75% of all the education spending in Turkey.[46] This remarkable dependency of schools on central authority is not restricted to economic resources and also includes decision-making processes. In 2017, Turkey had the second-largest share of decision-making at the central level with 72.9% compared to the OECD average of 23.8%.[47] Similarly, TALIS 2018 results,[48] based on principals' reports, acknowledge that the autonomy of principals regarding appointing their staff remains very low in Turkey (9%) when compared with the OECD average (70%).[49] According to the TALIS 2018 findings, teachers' impact on designing the curriculum is extremely limited in Turkey. Only 4.3% of lower secondary principals, in comparison to 41.8% in OECD average, believe that teachers in Turkey have an impact on school policies, curriculum, and instruction.[50]

As far as the healthcare system in Turkey is concerned; children without parents, children under state protection, children under temporary protection status,[51] children whose parents do not have any income or income below ⅓ of the minimum wage are entitled to

44 MoNE, 2019a.
45 Education at a Glance, 2018.
46 Korlu, 2020.
47 OECD, 2020a.
48 OECD, 2020b.
49 The-9%-autonomy in appointing staff can be partially explained by the increasing share of private educational institutions in Turkey because the share of students enrolled in private educational institutions (have autonomy in recruiting teachers) increased from 3.3% in the 2012–13 academic year to 8.7% in 2019–20. See Korlu, 2020.
50 OECD, 2020b.
51 Temporary protection is the legal status of Syrian refugees in Turkey.

healthcare services until the age of 18.[52] In short, all children under the age of 18 have access to free healthcare services. Since 2016, a new project launched by the MoNE in cooperation with the Ministry of Health has sought to ensure that the students are given regular check-ups by a family doctor once a year.[53] However, up until now, there is no available data on the number of students that have benefited from the project nor the extent of the project's success. Apart from that, to ensure the access of low SES children to healthcare services, Turkey implements a Conditional Cash Transfer for Health program through which low SES parents receive 35 TRY per month if they take their child (0–6 years) to hospital regularly.[54] In schools, children in the 1st and 8th grades are vaccinated through the 2009 Circular on Expanded Immunization Program.[55] In addition to that, the Ministry of Health states that Turkey's immunization program includes 13 antigens and "has the largest electronic vaccine tracking and cold chain tracking system in the world and is, therefore, one of the leading modern immunization programs globally."[56] UNICEF's data on worldwide immunization proves how the vaccination in Turkey is implemented successfully. UNICEF uses DTP[57] coverage to understand the level of immunization in a country and Turkey's DTP coverage has already reached 99%.[58]

In collaboration with the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services (MoFLSS), the MoNE provides Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) for families with low SES, on the conditions that parents do not have paid jobs and their children are to enroll and attend school regularly. 1.7 million families benefited from the CCTE and the Ministry paid more than 93.5 million TL for September 2020.[59] In partnership with the MoFLSS, the MoNE, Turkish Red Crescent (TRC), and UNICEF, the CCTE program was extended to cover school-aged refugee children in Turkey in 2017.[60] The latest figure

52 Social Security and Universal Health Insurance Law, Article 69.
53 Ministry of Health, n.d.
54 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family and Social Policy, n.d.
55 Ministry of Health, 2009.
56 Ministry of Health, 2018.
57 "The percentage of children receiving the diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis vaccine (DTP) is often used as an indicator of how well countries are providing routine immunization services" (UNICEF, 2020).
58 UNICEF, 2020.
59 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 19 October 2020.
60 Korlu, 2020.

from November 2020 shows that 631,278 Syrian children benefited from the CCTE program.[61] In addition, only those children that benefit from free transportation services and attend boarding schools are eligible for free school meals.[62] Free transportation services are generally employed in rural areas where schools are located in a dispersed fashion, far away from the houses of students. Therefore, rather than low SES, proximity to school is key in implementing free transportation and school meal services. As for day-care services, pre-primary education is not compulsory in Turkey. As far as low SES students are concerned, children aged 0–6 and under protection benefit from the free quota of 3% offered by the private educational institutions.[63] Furthermore, pre-primary education for children with special needs is compulsory and parents receive monthly financial support to cover education and rehabilitation expenses. 1,367 children in 2019 and 2,024 children in 2020 are enrolled free of charge in private schools for their early childhood education.[64] As Turkey does not employ social workers at schools, school counsellors try to fill that gap by flagging a student in need and informing law enforcement officers. Then, the student is included in the social care system. There are also other in-school methods such as support from school-parent associations and teachers' individual efforts. However, these methods fail to substitute a rights-based framework and are left at the discretion of individuals, who may also produce discriminatory practices in the school environment.

61 Inter-Agency Coordination Turkey, 2020.
62 Official Gazette, 2014.
63 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, n.d.
64 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 19 November 2019.

Changes in recent years affecting equity in education

In this part, the national report will focus on the research and projects of NGOs as well as the MoNE on equity in education. For example, the Network for the Rights of Children with Disabilities published a shadow report on the current situation of children with disabilities in Turkey. The network argues that Turkey's commitment to ensure an equal environment for children with disabilities remained only in theory. 42.3% of children with disabilities did not graduate from primary schools and the net enrollment among children with disabilities is still unclear due to the lack of information on the population. The number of children with disabilities that enrolled in schools dramatically decreases following graduation from lower secondary schools. Only 7.7% of people with disabilities are high-school graduates.[65]

As described previously, the frequent rotation of teachers in some regions exacerbates the lack of educational attainment for children, especially in rural, less developed regions. For that reason, in 2019, the MoNE launched a new project targeting teachers in villages. Conducted in collaboration with Sabancı Foundation and KODA (Village Schools Transformation Network) which works with teachers in rural areas, the project supports teachers' social lives and improves their professional competence at village schools. The primary objective of the project is to reach 7,000 teachers working in multi-grade classrooms in villages and to enhance the professional skills of teachers.[66]

On the other hand, the Minister of National Education, Ziya Selçuk introduced the School Profile Assessment plan in March 2019.[67] The School Profile Assessment plan aims to reduce inequalities among schools, ensure a holistic improvement of the school system through-

65 Engelli Çocuk Hakları Ağı, 2019.
66 MoNE, 26 December 2019.
67 MoNE, 13 March 2019.

out the country, and contribute to data-driven decision-making processes.[68] The Assessment consists of monitoring, evaluation, and support stages, and focuses on 1) academic achievement, 2) social, sports, and cultural activities, 3) projects, 4) institutional capacity,[69] through evaluating approximately 50 indicators.[70] After a school's profile is determined, an action plan for improvement is to be created and implemented by school principals and teachers, while "improvement teams" will join them later.

Turkey has an ever-changing education policy context, where many reforms and changes regarding various aspects of the education system seem to be constantly underway. Reforms and projects related to girls' education, expanding mandatory education to 12 years, changes to the national placement exams for transition between education levels, emphasis on early childhood education in recent years, along with the introduction of a tuition support incentive system to increase private sector's share in education are all factors that have had an impact on equity in education.

Gender inequality in education can lead to absenteeism, dropping out and early school leaving. The MoNE has collaborated with the civil society for various projects with an emphasis on increasing girls' participation in education and enhancing gender equality in education since 1995. These include:

- **2003 – 'Girls, Let's Go to School!' Campaign:** The campaign sought to increase girls' school enrollment rates in primary education (ages 6–14). It started with a focus on provinces and regions suffering from the lowest school enrollment rates and was later on expanded nationally. A total of 222,800 girls had enrolled in school by 2006.
- **2011–2013 – The Project for Increasing Enrollment Rates, Especially for Girls (KEP I):** The project aimed to increase girls' enrollment rates, quality of education, and collaborate with the private sector to invest in human resources in education. It was implemented in 16 provinces where a total of 3,200 homes were visited in six provinces and 2,000 children were registered to school.

68 MoNE, 2019b.
69 Ibid.
70 MoNE, 13 March 2019.

- **2014–2016 – Promoting Gender Equality in Education Project (ETCEP I):** The aim of the project was to mainstream gender equality in the national education policies and curricula. The project was implemented in 40 schools in 10 provinces where approximately 5,000 teachers received an awareness training, 542 female teachers and administrators attended leadership trainings, and 12,000 students participated in related events.
- **2016 – The Project for Increasing Enrollment Rates, Especially for Girls II (KEP II):** As a continuation of KEP I, KEP II was implemented in 15 cities, where 31,500 stakeholders of education took part in trainings, 6,600 attended awareness sessions, 9,500 participated in various events, and 9,424 family visits were conducted. Also, 5,022 girls were enrolled in school as a result.
- **2018 – Discontinued – The Project for Expanding Gender-Sensitive School Standards:** The project was planned to span over two years and intended to contribute to the achievements of ETCEP. It targeted 162 institutions in 81 provinces where an Activity Book for Gender Equality in Education was created for 12 select subjects,[71] and 468 school administrators, teachers, and counsellors went through in-service training on Gender Equality in Education. The project was terminated due to the controversies that emerged later on

The above-mentioned projects clearly contributed to the increase in girls' school enrollment rates. However, gender equality continues to be a crucial issue in education, not only in regard to the content of education but also for dropping out and early school leavings especially following the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 30, 2012, Law on Amendment of Elementary Education and Training Law and Along with Some Other Laws no. 6287, commonly referred to as "4+4+4" law, was passed in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT). The law introduced many changes to

71 The subjects were Physical Education and Sports, Biology, Geography, Physics, Visual Arts, English, Chemistry, Mathematics, Health Education and Traffic, History, Turkish Literature, and Philosophy.

the education system.[72] The duration of compulsory education rose from 8 years of uninterrupted education (5-year primary education + 3-year lower secondary education at the same school) to 12 years of intermittent education (4 years of primary education + 4 years of lower secondary education + 4 years of secondary education at different schools, hence "4+4+4"). Before the law, the duration of secondary education was 4 years and it was not compulsory. The intermittent "4+4+4" system also cleared the path for directing children to religious education (lower secondary schools for imams and preachers) or vocational and technical education (vocational and technical junior high schools) as early as age 9 and 10 instead of the previous age limit 15 for that kind of education.[73] The age to start primary education was decreased to as early as 60 months (students aged between 60 months – 72 months were eligible to enroll in first grade) from the previous 72 months limit. However, this particular issue raised grave concerns nationwide, and the starting age for first grade was increased to 66 months.[74]

Increasing the compulsory education duration contributed positively to school enrollment rates of both boys and girls. However, it is worth noting that the enrollment rates for these levels (primary, lower secondary, and secondary) are yet to reach 100%. Furthermore, the intermittent structure, which allows specialization in religious, vocational, and technical education at early ages, has been criticized by many stakeholders of education on the grounds that transition age was way too young and the system could lead to increasing inequalities in education.

The government's efforts to increase access to pre-primary education is also noteworthy. Currently, pre-primary education in Turkey is not free or compulsory, except for students with special needs. Pre-primary education is compulsory for children with special needs that are 36 months old or above.[75] The MoNE introduced a preschool education program in 2009. Turkey's Tenth Development Plan

72 See Şaşmaz, 13 March 2013; ERI, 2013. For the related policy briefs published by ERI, see http://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/444-bilgi-notlari/

73 Zeldin, 2012.

74 MoNE, 2012.

75 Official Gazette, 7 July 2018.

2014–2018,[76] introduced in 2014, had set the target for the pre-primary enrollment rates of the three– to five-year-old at 70%.[77] The MoNE aimed for the same rate of enrollment in the 2015–2019 Strategic Plan.[78] Other higher-level policy documents, such as the Medium-Term Programs 2017–2019 and 2018–2020, New Economy Program 2020–2022 (Medium Term Program), and Turkey's Education Vision 2023, also included goals to improve the pre-primary enrollment rates.[79] Although pre-primary education enrollment rates have been increasing, they are still below the previous objectives and the OECD averages. The importance of early childhood education and its relationship to socioeconomic status, both as a contributing factor and as a factor affected by it, is increasingly acknowledged.[80] Therefore, it is important that the issue gain salience and priority in policymaking.

There is a strong relationship between socio-economic status and the school type that a student is enrolled in.[81] Students are placed in secondary education and higher educational institutions based on their performance and ranking in the national placement exams. Opportunities to practice and familiarity with the test-taking strategies, availability of which depend on the family's SES, contribute to students' performance in the multiple-choice tests. There have been a number of changes in the national placement tests over the years.[82]

It is important to ensure a standard for the quality of education at every institution regardless of the school type, region, and the SES of the neighborhood where the school is located. As long as inequality among schools prevails and millions of students compete for spots at a limited number of elite institutions annually, the testing system will continue to reproduce the cycle where students with the necessary means will perform better at standardized tests and will receive a quality education, which will in turn pave the way for their participation in the economy that will either sustain or sometimes improve their SES later on in life.

76 Republic of Turkey Ministry of Development, 2014.
77 Batyra, 2017.
78 ERI, 2019a.
79 Ibid.
80 Batyra, 2017.
81 ERI, 2017; ERI, 2015.
82 Aksoy & Arık, 2017.

Another policy related to inequality in education is the financial incentives granted to families whose children enroll in private schools. The incentive system was initiated in the 2014–2015 academic year. The MoNE announced that the system would phase out starting from the 2019–2020 academic year. The MoNE's policies led to an increase in the share of the private sector in education. However, the amount of support was criticized in the past for not covering a meaningful portion of school tuitions, thus providing support mainly for the families who are already able to afford to send their children to private institutions.[83]

83 ERI, 2019c.

Key Conclusions and Recommendations

The MoNE's efforts to raise awareness among teachers and principals for low SES students by initiating inclusive projects are actually in line with Turkey's legal and official documents. Nevertheless, how and to what extent they produce successful outcomes remain unclear. To this end, impact evaluations are required to assess the outcomes from these projects. Moreover, it has been brought to attention during the focus group meeting that while the policies and projects concentrate on teachers and school principals overwhelmingly, they overlook out-of-school-factors that cause discriminatory practices. Therefore, further attention should be paid to projects and initiatives focused on public opinion in an effort to change and improve the discourse against vulnerable groups, including low SES students, refugee children, and children with disabilities.

As for the differences between schools and regions, PISA results clearly show how students with a similar socioeconomic background are intensified in the same schools, which in turn also creates a vicious cycle, hindering social and economic upward mobility for these students. Regarding the differences among regions, the MoNE report obviously displays the negative impact of the frequent rotation of teachers on the students' educational attainment. In addition to increasing service points, the MoNE needs to make these disadvantaged regions attractive to teachers by providing them with financial and social incentives.

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