



DROP OUTS IN TURKEY'S BASIC EDUCATION POLICIES FOR MONITORING AND PREVENTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

STUDY ON “DROP OUTS IN TURKEY’S BASIC EDUCATION - POLICIES FOR MONITORING AND PREVENTION”

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Only the Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV), the Association for Support and Training of Women Candidates (KA.DER) and the Educational Reform Initiative (ERG) are responsible for the contents of this publication, which does not in any way reflect the opinions of the European Union.

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PREFACE

Having everyone complete a high-quality basic education program is one of Turkey's foremost goals. The efforts of the State and the various campaigns launched by NGOs have made a significant positive contribution to increasing the schooled population. Having everyone attend school, however, is not the only aspect of the matter. Just as important is to ensure that children complete a program of primary education. In other words, both girls and boys must be deterred from dropping out of basic education.

“Raising Women: Reducing gender disparity in education through functional and political literacy, parent training, collective action and advocacy” project undertaken by AÇEV, ERG and KA.DER aims to address and eliminate the obstacles that prevent girls from receiving high-quality basic education. The study entitled “Drop outs in Turkey's Basic Education - Policies for Monitoring and Prevention” is the result of research carried out in this context and constitutes an analysis of the dropping out aspect of the issue.

Basic education regulations in Turkey do not address dropping-out but only deal with absenteeism. According to the regulations, absenteeism, even if continuous, is not a cause for dismissal. Therefore, children who have actually dropped out of school appear to be still registered with their schools for as long as they remain within the mandated age limit. This makes it impossible to determine the dimensions of the drop out problem in Turkey's basic education system, and renders solution-oriented efforts intractable.

The research “Drop outs in Turkey's Basic Education - Policies for Monitoring and Prevention”, carried out by Assoc. Prof. Fatoş Gökşen, Dr. Zeynep Cemalçılar and Dr. Can F. Gürlelel, analyzes the quantitative and qualitative background findings surrounding the issue. The policy recommendations in the study's concluding remarks seek to contribute to finding a solution to the problem. The research also points to the importance of the issue of dropping out of school and contributes to the development of communication and cooperation among the parties concerned.

This executive summary has been prepared for publication at the 2nd National Conference of Millennium Goals and Gender Equality which was held in the frame of the abovementioned project, and as such to assist in creating a forum to discuss the issue described above. If such discussions can at all contribute to the development of constructive solutions to the problem of dropping out, this research will have served its purpose.

We extend our gratitude to the local NGOs in the various provinces, the Provincial Educational Directorates and all the executives, teachers, mothers, fathers and children who have agreed to share their opinions with us.

INTRODUCTION

The basic subject of the study entitled “Drop outs in Turkey's Basic Education - Policies for Monitoring and Prevention” is the issue of “dropping out of school”, which is one of the most serious problems of the Turkish education system. The meaning of the term “dropping out” is, for the purposes of this study, restricted to dropping out from the educational program of basic education following the introduction of the compulsory eight-year primary program.

An uninterrupted eight-year basic education program was initiated with the coming into force of Law No. 4306, which was published in the Official Gazette dated August 18, 1997, numbered 23084. This eight-year program, which was introduced in the 1997-1998 academic year, applies to children aged 6-14, and makes basic education compulsory for all citizens, girls and boys, being free-of-charge at public schools.

After the introduction of eight-year compulsory education, priority was given to the fundamental goal of increasing the proportion of schooled children, generally throughout the whole population within the mandated ages, and particularly among girls. Significant improvements have been achieved in increasing the proportion of schooled children and the various comprehensive campaigns launched to this end have proved to be successful. In 2003, the proportion of schooled children was 88.2 % in the aggregate 90.9% for boys and 85.2% for girls. This is a significant achievement, but not enough.

Studies show that, although students are registered in schools and their participation in the system is ensured, a certain proportion is unable to complete the eight-year program due to a range of reasons, and ultimately drop out of the compulsory school program. The present study shows, through quantitative and qualitative findings, that this issue is one of Turkey's most important problems. The first objective of the study has been to establish the magnitude of the drop out problem in Turkey's basic education. Other objectives have been to determine the reasons that lead to dropping out of school and the resulting problems, to analyze the legal and institutional framework concerning drop outs, as well as to define how this issue is addressed. In this context, the goals of the study have been to offer recommendations for an effective system of monitoring drop outs in basic education, to develop policy recommendations that will prevent drop outs before they happen, to determine the various risk groups and raise public awareness.

The interrelated outputs and findings of the study were obtained and analyzed by means of four different complementary methods. First of all, a comparative analysis was made on an international scale to understand how dropping out is defined and how these definitions are shaped. The current Turkish legal and institutional framework was evaluated to determine how the issue of drop outs is handled in Turkey and to define what the approach of State authorities has been in this context. A comprehensive qualitative study was conducted by means of in-depth interviews held with many related parties. These qualitative findings were taken beyond the framework of personal opinion and incorporated into general findings. The fourth method used was the collection of quantitative data through field studies. The qualitative data was used to prepare for the field study, and it was seen that the qualitative and the quantitative data complemented each other to a great extent.

The qualitative and quantitative field research in the study covered six provinces: İstanbul, Diyarbakır, Mardin, Şanlıurfa, Erzurum and Konya. The reasons for choosing these particular provinces are the following:

As mentioned above, the main framework for the study was the project on “Raising Women: Reducing gender disparity in education through functional and political literacy, parent training, collective action and advocacy”. Four of the provinces where the study was conducted (İstanbul, Diyarbakır, Mardin and Şanlıurfa) are part of this project.

Gender inequality in education is relatively more pronounced in Southeastern and Eastern Anatolia, particularly in Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa and Mardin. These provinces, which occupy the lowest ranks in terms of socioeconomic development, are also known to be the areas where both the absolute and relative rate of students dropping out of basic education is high. At the same time, the three provinces are among the prioritized ten provinces that are part of the first stage of the “The Girls’ Education Campaign” launched by the Ministry of Education in cooperation with UNICEF. This is why these particular three provinces were chosen for this study. As for İstanbul, this metropolis was included in the study because of its diversity of socioeconomic status and the intense flow of migrants into the city, bringing in sub-groups of many different cultures. In one sense, İstanbul constitutes a model of Turkey’s general situation. Meanwhile, the provinces of Erzurum and Konya were chosen because drop out rates in these two areas are relatively higher than the other provinces of Eastern and Central Anatolia.

A maximum participation was targeted in the preparation for the study. In line with this target, at various stages of the preparatory work, interim findings and policy recommendations were shared with the academic faculty of the project administrator and other interested third parties, and the opinions of these persons were asked. The main findings and policy recommendations for the study were shared with the appropriate departments of the Ministry of Education and the views and suggestions gathered in this way were also incorporated into the study. In developing the preparations and policy recommendations for the study in its various stages, some methods were prioritized. First of all, the issue of dropping out of basic education was approached as a problem of social capital. Dropping out of school has socioeconomic aspects in terms of the reasons behind it and its results. Because of this, economic and social aspects have been emphasized in the recommendations offered. In the policy recommendations concerning the education system, a different approach was adopted and schools were regarded as “centers of the community” which can be developed and whose institutional and functional capacities can be improved. Lastly, the belief that an important function of the study would be to raise public awareness was a constant consideration throughout the study.

The study consists of four main sections: The first section defines the concept of dropping out, the second delineates Turkey’s legal and institutional status in this context, the third sets forth qualitative and quantitative field research and basic findings, and the fourth and last section presents recommendations for developing monitoring systems and policies geared to prevent drop outs.

I) DEFINITION

There are no clear, comprehensive or comparable definitions for the concept of dropping out of school at an international level. Differences in definition generally stem from elements such as how long the student has remained outside of the system, the reasons why the student has remained outside, the student's age and the student's school grade. The general international definition of "dropping out of school", however, is the termination of education without receiving a certified, official diploma.

Turkey's current legal regulations do not include a definition of dropping out of school at the basic education level.

The current legal framework in Turkey does not offer a definition of dropping out of school at the basic education level. This is because basic education in Turkey is mandatory. Dropping out of school is in effect a failure to fulfill a legal requirement and therefore does not have a place in law. There is, instead, a definition of absenteeism. However, since absenteeism has not been defined as a legal cause for dismissal from school, even students who are continuously absent are not regarded as having dropped out.

The present legal framework does define the conditions under which a student's registration with the basic education will be terminated. Legally, students' registration with the basic education is terminated due to death, health problems, holding an official report certifying that the student is unfit to continue, and being of an age that is outside the mandatory range.

The 21 different categories of responses received in the field study from 232 teachers and school principals on the definition of dropping out of school is an important indication that there exists no common and standard definition of dropping out in Turkey.

II) THE CURRENT SITUATION

There are two basic laws and two sets of regulations that form the legal framework and have a direct regulatory effect. These are National Education Law No. 1739, Elementary Education and Training Law No. 222, National Education Ministry Regulation No. 2552 on Basic Education Institutions, and National Education Ministry Regulation No. 2424 on National Educational Directorates.

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These laws and regulations determine methods and sanctions involved in registration and acceptance, new registration, school transfers, school attendance, non-attendance, class absenteeism, monitoring attendance, excused absences, granting permission, dismissal and absenteeism.

Accordingly, the current legal framework rules that students who are absent from school for consecutive days (number of days has not been specified) have to provide a letter of excuse from their families, guardians or custodians within three days; otherwise the school management reports the situation to the district civil authorities and the mukhtar (local headman of villages/neighborhoods), who in turn serve a notice to the student. If the student fails to return to school within three days after receiving such notice he/she is considered as non-attending and the family, guardian or custodian is subjected to a monetary fine.

The parties involved in various stages of non-attendance, as defined by the law, are the students' guardian, custodian or head of the family, civil authorities, elementary education inspectors, the municipal police, the school administration, and the mukhtars.

In the current system, basic education is the main source of information and statistical data on absenteeism and dropping out. Primary schools are required to keep records of student numbers, new registrations, students who leave due to transfer, students who do not renew their registration despite being required to do so, numbers of students who do not renew registration and those who are absent, who have dropped out or whose registration with the school has been terminated. This information collected by the school administration is conveyed to the Ministry of Education in two ways. At the beginning of each new academic year and at the end of each month of an academic year, this information is sent to the district and provincial educational directorates. This information is also saved in the IT systems of basic education, through the İLSİS project.

It is unfortunate, however, that because of both the deficiency in legal definition and the inadequacy of the statistical infrastructure, there is no way of accessing accurate information on the number of students who have dropped out of the basic education system. On the other hand, differences in the number of students attending basic education over the years provide significant information about drop out rates. The decrease in the number of students promoted to higher classes is an important indicator of how many students have dropped out.

The following can be seen when one considers the number of students in the first graduating class of 2004-2005, following the introduction of eight-year compulsory education in the academic year 1997-1998:

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While in the 1997-1998 academic year, the total number of students attending first grade was 1,360,720, in these children's graduating year (2004-2005), the total number of eighth-year students was 1,159,509. The fall in the number of students represents a 14.78% decrease, which breaks down into a 12.77% fall for boys and 17.12% for girls. According to Ministry of Education data (Ministry of Education, Department of Strategy Development, 2006), the number of children dropping out of school due to health reasons or death represents only a small percentage. The number of students whose registration has been terminated because they are older than the mandatory school age, however, is significantly high. For example, in the academic year 2001-2002, 123,306 registrations were terminated. While only 7,759 of these students were left outside the system due to health reasons or death, 115,547 did not complete their basic education because they surpassed the age limit. Looking at the data in terms of years, it is seen that an average of 90% of the students whose registration was terminated remained outside the basic education system because they had surpassed the mandatory age limit.

Because we have no access to a legal framework that can establish how many students dropped out and since there is no database on this, it will not be wrong to regard students who have remained outside the school system because of age as drop outs. Based on this assumption and with an approximate calculation, it can be said that the abovementioned fall in the number of students represents drop outs, minus an average of one percent. Accordingly, in the years mentioned, the loss ratio for students whose registration was terminated because of age is 13.50%. Another important point is that this ratio is higher for girls. In terms of years, the drop out ratio for girls is 5-10% higher than that for boys. In terms of grades, drop out is more intense in the 5th and 6th grades. This is more prominent among girls compared to boys.

When considering these figures in terms of provinces, certain parallelisms and at the same time some differences can be seen. In the provinces where the research was conducted, there were much more pronounced falls in the numbers of students by years. Again, in these provinces, the proportion of girls dropping out of school is above the average for Turkey, and the concentration around the 5th and 6th grades is more pronounced.

In short, although there is no comprehensive legal or institutional framework on dropping out of school, this phenomenon is actually experienced in our basic

education; it is a continuous and important issue. Between 1999-2005, 436,614 children continued their lives without obtaining a basic education diploma.

In this context, the following assessments can be made about the current legal and institutional framework:

- Dropping out of school lacks a standard definition.
- Law No. 222 is not being adequately enforced.
- Both school record-keeping systems and systems of census, population registration and updating of data are far from perfect. There are problems with recorded addresses and actual addresses of residence, the main reason for this being the high numbers of migrating families, reverse migration or relocation.
- Such problems in record-keeping make it difficult to maintain accurate information in schools and establish a statistical system. At the same time, schools do not have effective data processing mechanisms and applications.
- The powers of school administrations and school principals concerning drop outs are limited. In spite of this, however, it is the position taken by the school administration and school principal that is the determining factor in fighting this issue.
- The institutional and functional capacity of schools in preventing dropping out of school is limited.

Schools have no system to monitor drop outs and in this context, no risk groups have been defined.

III) FIELD RESEARCH AND BASIC FINDINGS

In this study, children who have left school without completing the compulsory eight-year educational program for any reason besides death or health problems and who have not continued their education at another school have been defined as drop outs. The field research was carried out in the provinces of Istanbul, Diyarbakır, Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Erzurum and Konya. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in two different stages.

One-on-one interviews were held with children who have left school, their parents and with teachers and administrators. Qualitative data was collected from 200 persons in these interviews and workshops. The qualitative study took place in the 6 provinces, where data was collected from 2356 persons (705 drop outs and their mothers, 352 children currently attending school and their mothers, 241 teachers).

The data collected using both methods were analyzed and evaluated independently of each other. Although the qualitative method provided data on subjective thought, opinions and recommendations and the quantitative methods provided objective data, it was found that both qualitative and quantitative data supported each other to a great extent.

The results can be summarized as follows:

- Dropping out of school is not only caused by the education system and the school itself, but is also influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors. Priorities and concentrations vary between regions. Moreover, it was also seen that reasons for dropping out differed in girls and boys.
- Dropping out of school is more prominent in the 5th and 6th grades. This shows that, besides other factors, the system of compulsory eight-year education is not very well-established. The grade in which the children -who were the subject of the study- dropped out was 4.43; the age of dropping out was 11.61. For girls, these figures were 4.32 and 11.47, respectively. Observations of teachers also supported

Girls drop out of school at an earlier age and in an earlier grade. This decision is usually made as a result of family pressures.

this finding. 24.9% of teachers said that children left school at maximum in the 5th grade, and 34.9% stated that they dropped out of school in the 6th grade. The teachers also declared that girls constituted a higher risk group in terms of dropping out of school.

In short, girls drop out of school at earlier ages and in earlier grades. This decision is usually made as a result of family pressures. 49% of the girls and 73% of the boys said they had made their own decisions about dropping out, and their mothers' responses supported this. However, the reasons given for the child's leaving school in effect raises doubts about who actually makes the decision. 30% of the children said they dropped out because they needed to work, 23% said they dropped out because their parents wanted them to.

Considering that 43.7% of the children had told their families that they wanted to go to school and 36.2% said they cried when they left school, it becomes apparent that the decision to drop out of school was not solely the decision of the children. Teachers, too, said that it was largely the fathers (71.5%) who made the decision for the child's dropping out.

- Studying the social, cultural and family-based reasons behind dropping out of school, it can be seen that one of the most important factors is whether or not the child's mother is literate. 83.5% of the drop outs have uneducated mothers while 62.2% of students attending school have literate mothers. This is a much more decisive factor for girls. If mothers are literate, 60% of daughters will attend school; if mothers are uneducated, 85% of girls drop out.

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The father's level of education is not a determining factor in children's education. In general, however, the level of education in the family does affect the family's expectations regarding the child's education. Parallel to this, to the extent that families are interested in their children's situation at school, there will be increasing percentages of children attending school.

- The second important factor linked to social, cultural and family-based conditions is whether or not the language spoken at home is Turkish. The language issue is particularly important because it is one of the primary factors affecting the child's achievement in school. Naturally, this situation differs depending on the province concerned. In Diyarbakır, for example, 15% of children who have dropped out of school speak Turkish at home; in Erzurum this increases to 82.7%. In general, across the provinces included in the present study, 48.1% of school drop outs came from Turkish-speaking homes.

- Factors stemming from economic conditions can be divided into two basic headings: having the child work in a workplace or at home due to economic problems and/or not being able to meet educational expenses. In particular, the child's working outside school, the family's lack of social security and situations where family members' individual allotments for expenses from the monthly family budget are low, all increase the probability that the child will drop out of school.

51.8% of boys who have left school have a wage-earning job.

Having to work outside home is the most important variable affecting a boy's dropping out of school. 51.8% of boys who have dropped out have wage-earning jobs. This ratio is 17% in girls, while not having enough money for education affects girls more than boys.

- Reasons stemming from the educational system and from school conditions are multidimensional. It was seen that the more children felt connected with the school, the higher was the rate of attendance. The most important variables influencing the sense of belonging to the school had to do with the relations the children formed with their teachers and with how attractive extracurricular activities were. It was observed that these variables did not vary considerably between girls and boys. Meanwhile, the physical conditions at the school and the environment of security were more important factors in the continued attendance of girls.

- The most impressive result of the study that concerned teachers was that 60% of the teachers stressed that the quality of the teacher was very important in ensuring the student's continued attendance. Citing some of the primary factors that play a role in dropping out of school, teachers mentioned the degree of material and psychological satisfaction teachers took out of teaching, the failure to allocate resources to education and the student's failure in school. From a teacher's viewpoint, deficiencies in the educational system constituted the main reasons behind dropping out.

At the same time, teachers believed that one of the first things to do to prevent the problem of dropping out was to raise families' awareness. The next, they thought, was to support teachers' efforts. Another solution teachers suggested was to increase the general public's expectations about education and enlist the support of the media in an attempt to increase the educational level of families.

IV) RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A MONITORING SYSTEM AND POLICY-MAKING

Policy recommendations are aimed at achieving four main targets:

1. Creating standards for dropping out and enlisting the help of a statistical model to establish a monitoring system.
2. Identifying and monitoring risk groups.
3. Increasing the institutional and functional capacities of schools. The school itself is the central focus in recommendations and policies formulated to prevent dropping out.

Recommendations for policies aimed at building institutional capacity include improving physical capacities, increasing schools' economic strength, renewing administrative systems at schools, improving teachers' skills and the opportunities given to teachers, making counselling systems more effective, establishing an effective scholarship system and enforcing existing legislation.

Policy recommendations aimed at building functional capacity include increasing students' sense of belonging to their schools; bridging the gap between school and family; increasing the level of education and awareness of mothers; identifying students' strong and weak points and giving them support; teaching Turkish to children whose mother-tongue is not Turkish or to students whose Turkish is weak; and informing families, guardians and custodians about existing legal requirements.

4. Improving economic and social opportunities and support. Supporting children who remain outside the system due to economic difficulties or those who carry this risk, along with their families, with various funds and scholarships. Expanding mother-and-child education programs and programs that support migrating families.

From another perspective, the recommendations concerning monitoring systems and the implementation of policies involve the creation of a link between receiving public services and urging families to send their children to school, expanding the requirements concerning basic education diploma, preventing child labor, creating a clear legal framework regarding the education of primary education-age children roaming the streets and juvenile delinquents, terminating illegal courses offered as alternatives to basic education, formulating and implementing a communications strategy in the area of dropping out, reorganizing the institutional structure of the Ministry of Education and benefiting from the information gathered by State authorities in the "The Girls' Education Campaign".



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