

GENDER, STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, AND REGIONAL DISCREPANCIES

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INTRODUCTION

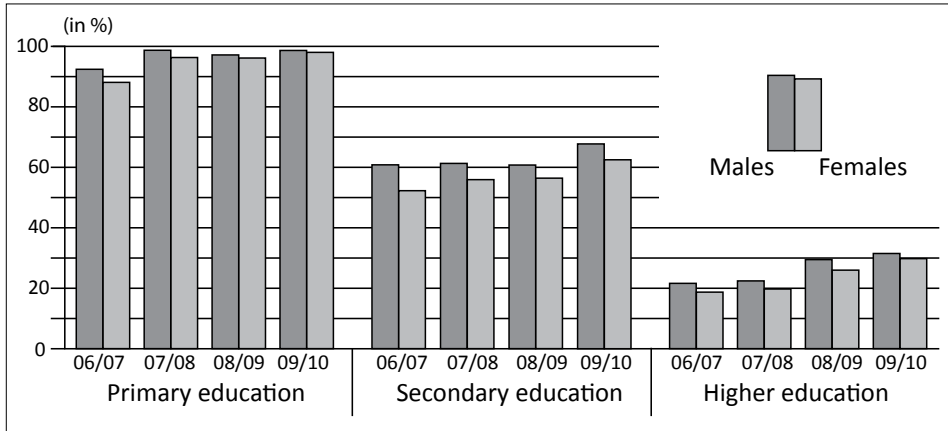
Although Turkey is among the twenty largest economies in the world (OECD, 2010), its level of economic development is not reflected in all spheres of society. According to the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index for 2010, out of 169 countries Turkey ranked 84th overall, but in education specifically it ranked 109th (UNDP, 2010). Although various projects for improving the educational system have been attempted, especially after Turkey became a candidate for joining the European Union, the challenges persist. Among them, student achievement, gender inequality, and regional discrepancies are the most prominent. Although each of these challenges is treated separately in what follows, they are, in fact, closely related in cause and effect.

GENDER DISCREPANCIES IN EDUCATION

Even though the enrolment rates for female students and the length of time they spend in schools have substantially increased over the years, gender inequality still exists (see graph 1) and remains beneath international standards (Duman, 2010).

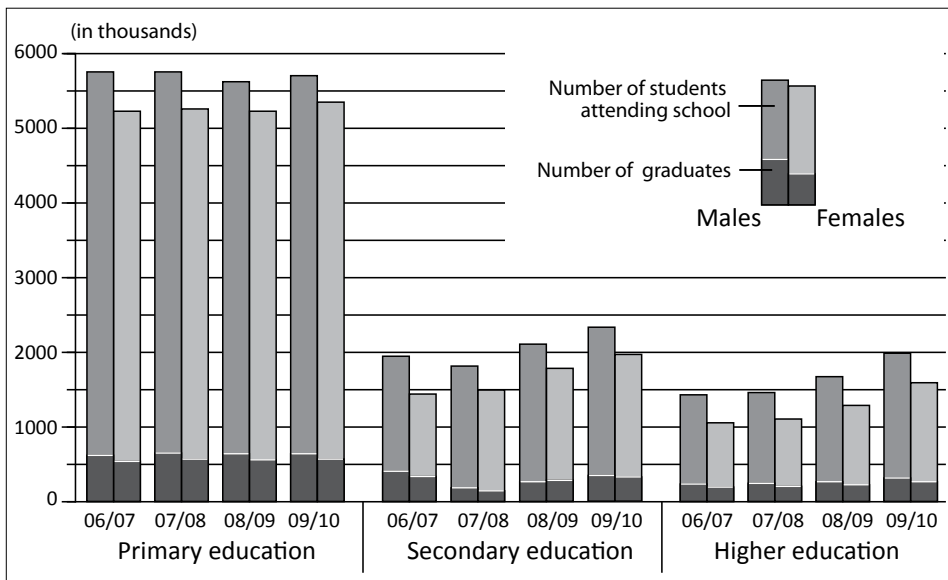
There are several reasons for the gender gap. At the primary level, the parents' lack of education is a prevailing factor that impedes the participation of girls.

Research shows that one more year of either parents' education has a positive impact on girls' schooling (Bakiş, Levent, İnel & Polat, 2009).



Graph 1: The schooling ratio of Turkish students according to the level of education (source: MoNE, 2011)

Another reason is the occurrence of single parent families in which the girls are kept at home to help with the housework and to look after siblings (Bakiş, Levent, İnel & Polat, 2009; Candaş, Yılmaz, Günseli & Çakar, 2010; Duman, 2010; ERG, 2009). Regionally, girls are less likely to go to school in areas where agriculture is the only source of income for the family and the distance to school discourages attendance.



Graph 2: The number of students attending school and the number of graduates (source: MoNE, 2011)

In Southeastern Anatolia, conservative values and belief systems are likely to foster the problem (ERG, 2009). At the secondary level, the preference in families of low economic status is usually to give boys rather than girls the opportunity to go to school. As at the primary level, single parenthood (especially single motherhood) and an agricultural economy both have a negative impact on girls' schooling. The father's level of education is also influential (Bakış, Levent, İnel & Polat, 2009; Candaş, Yılmaz, Günseli & Çakar, 2010; ERG, 2009). At the level of higher education, female enrolment is limited for a variety of reasons: the lack of job opportunities, the cost of a university education, and the argument that a degree does not contribute much to the lives of women who are better off if they get married. Furthermore, at all three levels, female students have a lower rate of graduation than male students (see graph 2).

ACADEMIC DISCREPANCIES IN EDUCATION

Low levels of student achievement are a persistent challenge. Results of international assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that in reading and mathematical and scientific literacy, students in Turkey are way behind their peers in other member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). For instance, Turkey was ranked 29th among 30 OECD countries in 2006 and 32nd among 34 OECD countries in 2009. Studies analysing the determinants of these test results report that student achievement in Turkey is most affected by socioeconomic background. Using data from the 2006 PISA surveys, Dinçer and Uysal (2010) found that the greatest determinant of student achievement is the type of school that students attend, which in turn is associated with family income. For instance, students in Anatolian High Schools, which accept students according to highly competitive nationwide examinations that favour the children from well-to-do families, get higher scores than students in general high schools (40 points higher) and vocational high schools (70 points higher). In the same study, Dinçer and Uysal (2010) found that student achievement is substantially affected by parental employment and the father's education. Moreover, the average socioeconomic status of students in a given school has a positive impact on their achievement. Their findings suggest that 'students coming from similar socioeconomic background enrol in similar schools, which might imply peer effects or better learning environments. In either case, it seems that the education system is reproducing the disadvantages stemming from socioeconomic background rather than erasing them' (p. 598).

In a study of the 2009 PISA results, Blanchy and Şaşmaz (2011) reported similar findings. Using the Economic, Social, and Cultural Status (ESCS) index, in which the socioeconomic condition of each student is taken into account, they compared the test scores of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds with those

of lower socioeconomic backgrounds. They found an achievement gap between these two groups in OECD countries, but the gap in Turkey was significantly wider than the average. In line with Dinçer and Uysal (2010), the results of Blanchy and Şaşmaz (2011) confirm that students' socioeconomic background has a major effect on academic achievement in Turkey. They stated, 'When the relationship between socioeconomic background and academic achievement in Turkey is compared to other countries, the correlation is much higher and is bolstered by the fact that schools are divided according to socioeconomic background' (Blanchy & Şaşmaz, 2011, p. 133). Just as socioeconomic development differs regionally in Turkey, so student achievement on international assessments differs from one region to another. Erberber's (2009) analysis of the results from the 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) clearly shows that science achievement differs regionally (cited in McClure, 2011). That these results are consistent with earlier studies underscores the persistence of the problems (Yayan & Berberoğlu, 2004; Alpay et al., 2007, cited in Dinçer & Uysal, 2010).

REGIONAL DISCREPANCIES IN EDUCATION

There are seven regions in Turkey. The four western regions, Marmara, Aegean, Central Anatolia, and Mediterranean, are more socioeconomically developed than the three more rural eastern regions, Black Sea, Eastern Anatolia, and Southeastern Anatolia. Istanbul, the industrial hub of the country, is in Marmara; Ankara, the capital city, is in Central Anatolia. These two regions are more urbanized with higher populations (Erberber, 2009, cited in McClure, 2011).

As in every other way, the regions differ markedly in the context of education. The number of students enrolled in primary education is greater in western regions than in eastern regions. Access to education and the quality of education are also more positive in western regions (McClure, 2011). Girls, particularly, are more disadvantaged in eastern regions in terms of access to schools and levels of achievement than are girls in western regions. At the primary level in the Marmara, Aegean, Central Anatolia, Mediterranean, and Black Sea regions, the percentage of females enrolled in schools was around 48 %, whereas it was around 44 % in Southeastern Anatolia and 42 % in Eastern Anatolia (Coker, 2002, cited in McClure, 2011). In addition, attrition rates in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia for both boys and girls are problematically high; 'By the time fifth grade students reached eighth grade close to half of the female students and one fifth of the male students had dropped out from the schooling system' (Coker, 2002, p. 141, cited in McClure, 2011). In terms of student achievement, again there are big differences among regions. Erberber's study (2009) indicated that the regions with the highest TIMSS scores were Marmara, Aegean, and Central Anatolia, and

the lowest scores were in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia (Erberber, 2009, cited in McClure, 2011).

A study conducted by Olgun, Gümüş, and Adanacioğlu in 2009 revealed that 39.25 per cent of the rural villages they visited did not have a primary school. Students in these areas had to travel an average of eleven kilometres to go to school. Moreover, heavy weather conditions and lack of good roads compounded the problem, making it very difficult for students to continue their education (Olgun, Gümüş & Adanacioğlu, 2009, cited in McClure, 2011). The same study also indicated that in several rural areas which did have schools, there were other severe problems, including a lack of teachers, overcrowded classrooms, few resources, different classes in the same classroom, and too many missed lessons hours (Olgun, Gümüş & Adanacioğlu, 2009, cited in McClure, 2011).

CONCLUSION

In this section, the challenges of the Turkish educational system in terms of gender, student achievement, and regional discrepancies have been examined. It is clear that the system is far from providing equal educational access and opportunities for all students; rather it perpetuates existing inequalities. Given that ‘Turkey is the country with the second most unequal income distribution, right after Mexico, among all OECD countries’ (Buğra, Bilgen, Çakar, Yılmaz, The Bosphorus University Social Policy Forum Report, 2010, cited in Bianet News in English, 29/7/2010) education is one of the most critical means of alleviating the problem. Thus, the development and implementation of more effective educational policies must be given the highest priority.