

# **Does the Village (School) Still Exist in Turkey?**



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# Acknowledgment

As KODA, since 2016, we have been working to strengthen teachers and families so that children in villages can receive a quality education. With each program we have implemented, we have gained a deeper understanding of the field, encountered new needs, and developed new solutions together with those who joined our network.

From Muş to Aydın, Bursa to Batman, and Kastamonu to Şanlıurfa, our journey has been filled with diverse experiences from across Turkey. We have witnessed the significance of rural areas, villages, village schools, and every individual within this ecosystem. While working directly in the field with the adults surrounding children, we recognized the need to support our words with data—not only to enhance the impact we create but also to make the needs in this field more visible.

With every crisis, we have seen that rural areas offer countless opportunities to build something better. The motivation to develop rural-specific education policies, ensure fair attention to rural areas, and present the knowledge we've accumulated over the past eight years through data led us to prepare this series of articles. When the idea for this project first emerged, we had just come through the pandemic, but the **February 6 Earthquakes** had not yet occurred. After the earthquakes, our understanding of village schools was tested once again. The initial drafts for this series were erased and rewritten countless times. During this process, we crossed paths with the **STGM team**, and together, we created a video in the villages of Hatay to explain the relevance of this article series.

This series is the product of collective effort. Therefore, we extend our heartfelt thanks to **Demet Taşkan, Gökçen Karaman, Hatice Azın, Muhammed Atalay, Okan Pala** and **Öykü Kocaman**, whose experiences and insights enriched our articles. We also thank the **STGM team members Ezgi Karataş, Hakan Ataman, Murat Özçelebi** and **Özge Azap**, who helped transform our message into a visual and auditory experience.

Lastly, we are deeply grateful to all the teachers, teacher candidates, parents, village heads, academics, and volunteers who, over the past eight years, have opened their villages, schools, and experiences to us.



## Does the Village (School) Still Exist in Turkey?

**When we begin talking about village schools, the first question we are often asked is, “Do villages (and their schools) still even exist in Turkey?” Let us quickly answer: Yes, they do. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT), 14.7 million people, or 17.3% of Turkey’s population, live in areas classified as rural. Of these, 2.8 million are under the age of 15. And, 15 out of every 100 children in Turkey are dependent on educational opportunities provided in the village to receive schooling close to home.**

Census data collected from the founding of the Republic of Turkey show that between 1927 and 1960, the rural population was larger than the urban population<sup>1</sup>. Yet, by 2012, official figures indicated that only around one in four people (22.7% of the population) resided in small towns and villages<sup>2</sup>. That same year, a new regulation was introduced which blurred the definition of what constitutes a village and, thus, skewed the figures of the total rural population. Titled the “Metropolitan Municipality Law”<sup>3</sup> (Law No. 6360), the regulation increased the number of metropolitan municipalities by 14, raising the total to 30 and, relatedly, saw the legal status of 16,000 villages and small towns be abolished, converting them instead into neighborhoods of the newly established municipalities. As a result, the number of villages in Turkey dropped from about 34,000 to 18,000<sup>4</sup>, and the official figure for the “rural population” decreased by approximately 60% – not in practice of course, but in government records. Hence, in 2013, TURKSTAT data reported that the proportion of people living in towns and villages had dropped from 22.7% of the total population to just 8.7%<sup>5</sup>. In 2021, a new directive<sup>6</sup>, was introduced to address some of the issues caused by Law No. 6360. This regulation allowed residential areas that had been converted into neighborhoods but still retained rural characteristics to apply for re-designation as “Rural Neighborhoods” or “Rural Residential Areas.” While this measure helped address some challenges faced by these rural areas, it also led to data inconsistencies.

To overcome this confusion, TURKSTAT released population statistics in May 2023 using a new classification system that more accurately reflected urban and rural structures, independent of the legal status of settlements<sup>7</sup>. This three-tier classification—Dense Urban, Moderately Dense Urban, and Rural—revealed that 14.7 million people, or 17.3% of Turkey’s population, live in areas classified as “rural,” which make up 93.5% of the country’s land area. Of this population, 2.8 million are children under the age of 15.

<sup>1</sup> Kaştan, Y. (2006). The function of population movements in the Republican era. *Türk Coğrafya Kurumu Dergisi*, 43, 65-76.

<sup>2</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). (2013). Address-based population registration system results 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Resmî Gazete. (2012, December 6). Law on the establishment of metropolitan municipalities in thirteen provinces and twenty-six districts, and amendments to certain decree laws (No. 28489). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. (2021). National rural development strategy (2021-2023).

<sup>5</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). (2014). Address-based population registration system results 2013.

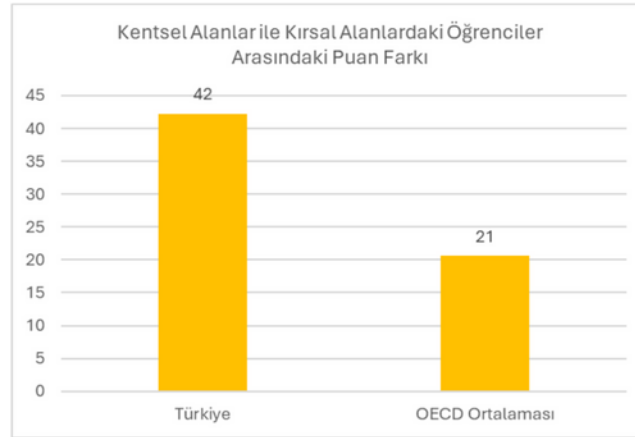
<sup>6</sup> Resmî Gazete. (2021, April 15). Regulation on rural neighborhoods and rural settlement areas (No. 31455). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.

<sup>7</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). (2023). Urban and rural population statistics 2022.





Returning to the question, “Do villages (and their schools) still exist in Turkey?”, there is no specific data indicating how many schools are currently operational in the areas classified by TURKSTAT as rural. However, the presence of 2.8 million children living in these areas makes the question of whether village schools still exist irrelevant. Instead, it prompts us to ask, “Are we able to provide a sufficiently quality education to the child population living in rural areas?” We can reify the answer to this question with data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), developed by the OECD, which evaluates the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds every three years<sup>8</sup>.



This graph, derived from the 2018 PISA results, illustrates the extent to which students in urban areas outperform their peers in rural areas in reading, science, and mathematics scores. The graph shows that, on average, students in urban areas of OECD countries score 21 points higher than their rural counterparts, highlighting a shared disadvantage in rural education among these countries. However, in Turkey, the gap between urban and rural students is twice the OECD average (42 points), indicating that educational inequality between urban and rural areas is significantly wider in Turkey compared to other OECD countries.

### **Let's continue with another question: What factors exacerbate the quality gap in education between rural and urban areas in Turkey?**

To begin, we must address the root causes, or the structural factors. Characteristics such as agriculture being the dominant economic activity, the prevalence of primary relationships, low population density, and a lack of stimuli in educational environments all indicate that students in villages are educated in contexts that differ significantly from those in urban areas. Despite this, rural and urban education follow the same curriculum and are evaluated based on a shared set of criteria. The “Turkey’s Century Education Model” developed by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) and approved in May 2024, also falls short of addressing the unique characteristics and needs of rural education. As a result, a village teacher may find themselves delivering content that their students struggle to relate to or apply within their lived experiences.

<sup>8</sup> OECD. (2022). Student achievement in Türkiye: Findings from PISA and TIMSS international assessments. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/c8a84283-en>



“Once in class, I taught children that passengers board buses through the front door and exit through the rear door. Next day, one of my students came to me and said, ‘Teacher, they didn’t let me board through the front door!’. Then I realized, in the village, there were only minibuses, which, naturally, had just one door for passengers to get on and off. The child had never seen a bus in their life and didn’t know where they could apply this information.”

### **A Village Teacher**

In recent history, other regulations focusing on rural education also fail to demonstrate the existence of a consistent and coherent policy approach that addresses the needs of villages. For example, practices like hiring substitute teachers — initially developed to meet teacher shortages in rural areas but increasingly treated as an employment policy — along with issues such as transfers due to marital status, inability to fill vacant positions, frequent use of leaves, and reassignment requests by teachers working in schools far from urban centers negatively affect the continuity and quality of education in rural areas.

The lack of a stable education policy tailored to villages is not a recent issue. Since the early years of the Republic, efforts such as Village Instructor Courses, Village Libraries, Village Midwifery Schools, Halkevleri (can be translated as People’s Houses or Community Centers), and their sub branches in villages, Halkodaları (People’s Rooms or Rural Community Centers) have been undertaken. Discussions on the ideal model for training village teachers<sup>9</sup>, establishing commissions to research village schools and education, creating curricula specific to village schools, and passing laws such as Act No. 4491 to establish Village Institutes or Act No. 3238 to train educators from within the village were all carried out. However, these efforts never followed a unified and meaningful trajectory. By the second quarter of the 20th century, the emphasis on a unified education policy led to a decline in initiatives specifically addressing the needs of rural education.

Within this structural framework lie concrete factors that disadvantage rural education. First, the low number of students in villages and the practice of assigning teachers based on student density reduce children’s access to guidance counselors and subject-specific teachers, limiting educational diversity in villages. Second, teacher candidates trained in education faculties are not adequately prepared for the conditions of rural education, particularly for teaching in multigrade classrooms. Teachers with no exposure to rural schools during their training often struggle to adapt when assigned to a village. Third, the widespread practice of busing students to schools outside their villages—common in areas where no local school exists—creates daily struggles for children who are not yet ready to leave their families or attend to their own needs. Finally, the attitudes of families living in villages toward education must also be considered. Shaped largely by socio-economic conditions, education often takes a backseat to other family needs. Children’s responsibilities within extended families, such as caregiving and agricultural work, lead to absenteeism.

<sup>9</sup> Sari, M., & Uz, E. (2017). Village instructor courses in the Republican era. *Turkish History Education Journal*, 6(1), 29-55.



Parents' weak belief in the necessity of education diminishes their motivation to allocate time for their children's development or collaborate with teachers. All these factors reduce the benefits students derive from the education available to them.

### **Can rural education, with its disadvantages, be easily dismissed?**

Certainly not. Education in villages does not consist solely of drawbacks. For example, the multigrade classroom model—often seen as a necessity due to teacher shortages and limited resources in rural areas—is preferred in countries with strong education systems for its benefits in peer learning. Taking advantage of nature and open spaces, fostering supportive connections between children and adults in their ecosystem, and closely monitoring the individual developmental needs of a small number of students are among the advantages of rural education.

Moreover, a school in a village is never just a school. Village schools serve as spaces for socialization, communication, and development, strengthening social bonds within the community and enriching human capital. For children, they provide a safe environment. In villages where teachers have access to housing, such as teacher lodgings, the bond between the teacher and the village can become an essential element of local development. Teachers, through their official connections with Provincial and District Directorates of National Education, act as bridges between rural and urban areas, making the needs of villages visible. Additionally, schools and teachers in villages become sources of resilience during crises. The argument that low population density justifies the closure of village schools turns into an advantage in times of crisis. The pandemic and the aftermath of the February 6 earthquakes demonstrated this when urban populations sought refuge in villages. Closing village schools forfeits both the educational advantages and the elements that strengthen village resilience and support local development.

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Each of the issues regarding rural education discussed here deserves more comprehensive and detailed evaluation. This series aims to do just that. For the first article, we chose to pose a straightforward and clear question for those working on this topic. Around this fundamental question, we summarized why rural education must be embraced by everyone. In subsequent articles, we will move beyond the simplistic question of "Are there any schools left in villages?" to assess rural education in greater depth, acknowledging that even two villages within walking distance can face entirely different challenges and opportunities.

