

What Does a Village School Signify for a Village?



Rural Schools Transformation Network
Date of establishment: December 5, 2016



www.kodegisim.org

bilgi@kodegisim.org

Osmanağa Mah., Söğütlüçeşme Cad.
No: 56, Altın Çarşı - 89 Kadıköy/İstanbul
0216 343 73 43



@kodegisim



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.



What Does a Village School Signify for a Village?

There are many methods to use when making a decision, but one of the most common is conducting a quick cost analysis. On one side of the scale, we place what we give up, and on the other, what we gain... However, when the future of a child is at stake, filling and emptying these scales is not so straightforward. In this article, we let the question, 'Should a village school remain open, even if only for a single child?' guide us away from cost calculations and toward a more philosophical discussion. Our aim is to explore the roles of village schools that extend beyond their primary function of providing education.

A Cup of Tea at the Village Coffeehouse?

As we highlighted in our introduction, while the status, economic and cultural relationships, geographical boundaries, and administrative structure of villages may change over time, the fundamental characteristics that define a village continue to persist. So much so that anyone familiar with this land wouldn't need a signboard to recognize a settlement as a village.

"Sometimes, it felt like the children spoke a different language. I still don't fully understand what 'cincik gibi' means. And my ignorance of what ebekulağı (snail in the local dialect) meant kept them laughing for days."

A Village Teacher

A majestic tree in the village square, with chairs and tables placed under its shade in the summer or beside its trunk in the winter; a coffeehouse whose patrons, with just a glance, convey their openness to strangers wanting to introduce themselves; the comforting aroma of fresh village bread if you're lucky, or the earthy smell of dried wood stored for winter if you're not. And of course, a school building—usually two-storied and painted in light pink tones—alongside its expansive yard, always open to passersby.

The significance of the school's presence in the village cannot be confined to the people within its walls or those passing through its yard. To understand the scope of this issue, we examine it from three dimensions: the impact of a school's presence in a village on the broader society, its effects on the relationships among different groups within the village, and its influence on individuals living in the village.

Who's in the Village School?

Let's begin with the broader perspective and examine the impact of villages with active agricultural production and education systems on society at large. Viewing a village's continued cultivation of its land, its transportation activity, or the preservation of its cultural structure as merely local issues is a narrow perspective. It's essential to demonstrate why this is not the case by considering the societal consequences of losing these rural functions.



First, mass migration from rural areas to cities leads to overcrowding, unplanned urbanization, air pollution, traffic, unemployment, detachment from nature, environmental degradation, limited access to healthy food, and insufficient education and healthcare services. Second, the abandonment of villages results in a decline in agricultural activities, which play a critical role in a nation's economic development. Third, the dissolution of rural communities weakens the cultural heritage of the entire society. Finally, especially in recent years, the global crises driven by natural or human-induced factors—exacerbated by the effects of climate change—continue to remind us that nature, togetherness, and collaborative action are among our most fundamental necessities for survival. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the February 6 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes hold significant stories about life in the village. Thus, utilizing the social and economic potential of rural areas has become a necessity for a sustainable future. Realizing this potential begins with ensuring every child's right to quality education.

Another dimension is the social groups that the school fosters within the village and the interactions among them. The presence of a school enables the formation of groups such as classmates, parents, and government employees while facilitating relationships between institutions like the District Directorate of National Education, local municipalities, and governors' offices. Just as cities, universities, and states are built on human relationships, villages also require similar networks to sustain themselves. When a village school closes and the transportation system replaces it, the number of social groups diminishes, and opportunities for intergroup interaction shrink.

"For us, having everything conducted remotely was challenging. Even when the school was operational, we sometimes struggled with parental disinterest. During the pandemic, trying to reach children through their families made everything even harder."

Village School Principal

Skills like coping with uncertainty, collaborating on shared activities, overcoming difficulties, and finding creative solutions are developed through participation in groups or communities. Social groups are essential even for the development of basic life skills. Communication between groups fosters a sense of belonging to the place one lives in, potentially transforming the entire village into a learning environment.

"We're doing fine, thank goodness. I've been living in the village for seven years, so I was able to provide psychological support to both children and families during the pandemic. Along with our preschool teacher, we visited homes while taking precautions. We never lost communication."

Village Teacher



Building on this, let us move on to the third dimension and take a closer look at the individual impact of a school's presence through its key actors: students and teachers. In the living space where we connect through intergroup communication, learning occurs as "at times through structured learning techniques, but more often spontaneously, ignited by the student's curiosity rather than pre-planned"¹.

On the other hand, the village school, by its mere existence, creates an opportunity for equal access to education. This is particularly crucial for girls who are expected to continue compulsory education under normal circumstances but are prevented from doing so for various reasons, for children forced into labor, and for students with special needs. When the school is not located in a readily accessible position, it can make continuing education virtually impossible for these groups.

"My students are special students. They have intellectual disabilities, and when I am not there, their education comes to an end. Families are in no position to provide anything educationally for their children."

Village Teacher

What Our Eyes Witness

Although economic hardship is often the driving force behind rural-to-urban migration, other factors such as industrialization, the fragmentation of agricultural lands through inheritance, increased mechanization, extreme weather conditions, natural disasters, limited economic activities outside farming, difficulties access to healthcare², infrastructural deficiencies, and restricted social opportunities for youth all contribute to the depopulation of villages.

At times of national crises, however, we often encounter the exact opposite. We don't have to look too far back—our experiences during the pandemic are still fresh in our minds. Those who could, fled to their villages; even after the immediate impact of the pandemic waned, many employees who had transitioned to remote work chose not to return to the cities. Following the February 6 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes, the initial instinct was also to move away from urban centers. Well, what makes villages fragile or resilient?

"This is my family's village. We're three families living in one house; it was even more crowded in the early days after the earthquake. Before the earthquake, there were no children here, and the school was closed. Afterward, about 30 children came to the village. I found a tent and brought supplies. Now, we're preparing for April 23 celebrations."

Village Teacher

¹ Goodwin, K., Kennedy, G., & Vetere, F. (2010). Getting together out-of-class: Using technologies for informal interaction and learning. In C. H. Steel, M. J. Keppell, P. Gerbic, & S. Housego (Eds.), Curriculum, technology & transformation for an unknown future: Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2010 (pp. 387-392).

² Keleş, R. (1996). Kentleşme politikası [Urbanization Policy]. İmge Yayınları.



When we dig into the roots of problems or solutions, we often find education at the core. Villages with operational schools witness the continuation of production activities, the preservation of social relationships, and the maintenance of limited spaces for socialization, especially for children.

"We come here to play soccer; otherwise, we'd be working in the fields."

Village Child

"If I weren't here, I'd be washing dishes at home."

Village Child

Reports prepared after the February 6 Kahramanmaraş Earthquakes reveal that psychological and social development needs were met in educational spaces³. In villages where school buildings were damaged or educational activities ceased entirely, temporary learning spaces created in tent camps positively impacted not only children but also adults.

"Now everyone is outside, sitting on benches and chatting. Communication has increased, and people's value is being recognized."

Village Child⁴

Conclusion

In the beginning, we mentioned that recognizing a village doesn't require a signboard. Similarly, sustaining what defines a village requires the continued presence of its school. A village with an open school also has at least one teacher for its classrooms, parents gathered in the schoolyard, cultivated land, and buses maintaining transportation. The school ensures that the cultural heritage of the village is carried forward into the nation's future.

³ Çocuk Çalışmaları Derneği, Suna'nın Kızları, & Sivil Toplum Geliştirme Merkezi Derneği. (n.d.). Reports and field notes from Türkiye Eğitim Gönüllüleri Vakfı.

⁴ Suna'nın Kızları. (2023). A girl-focused perspective on temporary shelter areas in the earthquake zone: An evaluation of spatial conditions and child services [Report].

