

Multigrade Classes and Bussed Education



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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.

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Multigrade Classes and Bussed Education

The need to develop alternative models for an existing practice arises from the necessity to address the problems and needs that become visible during its implementation. Creating alternative models requires establishing a delicate balance—one that not only responds to these issues and demands but also ensures that the core outcomes of the practice are achieved without generating new problems, all while considering the needs of all beneficiaries. However, when it comes to public services, these balances can often deviate from the conventional.

In this article, we examine alternative practices for the public service of education in rural areas. We aim to explain the options available within the current system for the education of primary school-aged children living in villages. While we do not detail the widely recognized practice of "single-grade classrooms," where each grade has its own class and teacher, we focus on multigrade schools, a practice specific to rural education. Additionally, we evaluate the practices of children in villages without schools, who attend centralized schools daily via transportation services.

Multigrade Classes

Currently, there is no updated official data on the number of students in Turkey who receive education in multigrade primary schools. However, according to the Ministry of National Education, during the 2020–2021 academic year, approximately 128,432 students were enrolled in 7,000 schools implementing multigrade classrooms¹. This figure corresponds to 2.4% of the 5,328,391 primary school students during the same academic year².

In primary schools with multi-grade classrooms (MGCs), teaching simply means that students in different grades receive education in the same classroom with the same teacher. For instance, students in the first and second grades do not have separate classrooms or class teachers; instead, six first-grade students and four second-grade students are taught together in Teacher Ayşe's class. If this is hard to picture, let's further concretize it by discussing how lessons are conducted in practice in many schools: While Teacher Ayşe has the first graders practice line drawing, she simultaneously works on reading aloud with the second graders. Then, while checking the line drawings of the first graders, she asks the second graders to answer questions about the passage they just read. This situation means that lesson planning and classroom management in multi-grade classrooms are quite different from those in single-grade classrooms.

¹ Ministry of National Education (MEB). (2020, June). 17 workbooks prepared for schools implementing multi-grade classrooms. MEB Website News.

² Ministry of National Education (MEB). (2021, September). National education statistics, formal education 2020-'21.



In sparsely populated rural areas, multigrade classrooms are a common feature, requiring teachers to take on multiple roles. First, because of low student numbers, multigrade primary schools do not assign separate teachers for each grade level, and likewise, schools with one or two teachers typically lack a designated principal. Instead, one of the teachers is assigned as the **"acting principal"** and, in addition to teaching lessons, is also responsible for official correspondence, cleaning the school, heating, and other similar physical needs. Second, teachers in four-grade multigrade classrooms must deliver the full curriculum for all grade levels within a single academic year. This requires the teacher to spend more effort and time on planning, preparation, and organization to ensure that students remain consistently engaged in active learning while addressing their diverse learning needs. Finally, **the absence of specialized teaching plans and materials** for multigrade classrooms and the **insufficient knowledge and experience** of teachers in managing and planning for these classrooms further complicates the process. All these factors negatively impact the teacher's professional motivation, leading them to lower their expectations of students, as they believe it is hardly possible for children to learn much in such a system with so many shortcomings.

Although the common perception suggests otherwise, multi-grade classrooms are not solely defined by disadvantages. In some alternative educational models, such as Montessori schools, which are more student-centered and emphasize peer teaching, multi-grade classrooms are preferred not out of necessity but because of their advantages³. They are employed worldwide, from England to Colombia. Multi-grade primary schools allow for the sharing of teaching responsibilities with students. In cases where the teacher is competent, these classrooms create the most effective learning environments for peer teaching. In peer teaching, not only does the teacher's workload ease, but older students take on a teaching role by assuming responsibility for their younger peers. This reinforces the older students' knowledge and encourages their active participation in the teaching process. A curriculum and teaching method centered solely on the teacher's instruction are not suitable for multi-grade classrooms. When supported with an appropriate curriculum that includes peer teaching, the multi-grade classroom system enables teachers to implement a single program encompassing all grade levels rather than multiple programs, thus reducing concerns about covering the curriculum. In multi-grade primary schools, parents also support the teacher and their children's education by taking responsibility for improving the physical conditions of the school. These interactions transform multi-grade classrooms into not just a learning environment but a dynamic and participatory school ecosystem, facilitating a holistic, community-focused educational experience in villages.

³ Montessori education, designed by Italy's first female doctor, Maria Montessori, is an alternative education model that aims to prepare children for real life by focusing not only on their academic success but also on their social and emotional development.



Bussed Education

For children in villages without operational schools due to low population density and insufficient student numbers, bussed education offers an alternative means of accessing education. This practice aims to "ensure access to education for students likely to be deprived of their right to education by transporting them to official schools or institutions," as stated in its objectives⁴. It is also employed when school buildings become unusable due to emergencies like natural disasters. In rural settings, bussed education, clustering in other words, involves transporting children daily from villages to centralized schools.

The rationale behind bussed education aligns with the Turkish National Education Basic Law of 1973⁵ which emphasizes equality of opportunity. Implemented since the 1990–1991 academic year, the system expanded further with the extension of compulsory education to eight years⁶. According to 2023–2024 statistics from the Ministry of National Education, 258,751 primary and 355,929 middle school students were transported to 12,921 centralized schools.⁷

From an education policy perspective, bussed education is justified by the balance of needs and resources. Key arguments include the opportunity for children to learn in single-grade classrooms, access to better education, exposure to broader social environments, and availability of superior physical facilities and materials. However, both academic studies^{8, 9, 10} and fieldwork highlight significant challenges for primary school students.

First, transportation itself poses difficulties. Daily commutes of up to 30 kilometers can be exhausting, worsened by road and weather conditions. Overcrowded buses, children standing during rides, unaccompanied travel, and unauthorized passengers introduce safety risks. Families' reluctance to send their children to schools far from home often hinders attendance, especially for already disadvantaged students. Some families even choose to relocate to areas with schools, contributing to rural depopulation.

⁴ Resmî Gazete. (2014, September 11). Regulation on access to education through transportation by the Ministry of National Education (No. 29116). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.

⁵ Resmî Gazete. (1973, June 24). Basic Law of National Education (Law No. 1739, No. 14574). Official Gazette of the Republic of Türkiye.

⁶ Yeşilyurt, M., Arslan, M., & Gökçen, G. (2007). Research on transportation-based education in primary schools: The case of Van city center. *Elektronik Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 6(19), 197-213.

⁷ Ministry of National Education (MEB). (2024). National education statistics 2023-'24.

⁸ Elçiçek, Z., & Kaplan, U. (2021). Teachers' evaluations of transportation-based education practices. *Iğdır Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 27, 202-219.

⁹ Yanbakar, E., Bulut, D., Mart, M., & Yavuz, R. (2023). Challenges faced by administrators and teachers in primary and secondary schools implementing transportation-based education. *Spor, Eğitim ve Çocuk*, 3(1), 1-27.

¹⁰ Repeçoğlu, E. (2013). Perceptions of administrators, teachers, students, and vehicle drivers regarding problems related to transportation and transport vehicles in Türkiye. *Cumhuriyet International Journal of Education*, 2(2), 123-144.



Furthermore, bussed education disrupts the establishment of strong school-family relationships. Families with preconceived negative views of education are less inclined to collaborate with unfamiliar schools and teachers. Additionally, social dynamics in centralized schools, such as exclusion of rural children by their peers and the creation of hierarchies, make adaptation particularly challenging for younger students¹¹.

Centralized Policy, Local Practice

Educational institutions serve not only as academic spaces but also as social and cultural learning environments. The responsibility of shaping individuals who will build the desired future for society is entrusted to school ecosystems. For this reason, countries design their education policies to varying degrees in alignment with the principle of educational unity. The goal is to establish an education system that is based on scientific and objective foundations, fosters a shared culture and values, maintains the quality and standard of education across all regions of the country, and ensures equal opportunities for all. In Turkey, the principle of unity in education has been fundamental, starting with the 1924 Law on the Unification of Education (Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu).

The principle of educational unity can be an effective tool in many aspects. However, in practice, an overly centralized approach that does not account for regional differences—or, in our context, the unique aspects of rural education—may not always yield the desired outcomes. If equal opportunity in education is viewed only in terms of academic achievement and access to well-equipped learning environments while overlooking factors crucial for children's holistic development, the system may fail to meet its goals. Therefore, the principle of educational unity can only achieve its ultimate purpose if it incorporates a level of flexibility that considers local needs and opportunities while allowing room for local participation.

A flexibility that takes local needs into account does not mean that educational unity must impose a one-size-fits-all solution for every region. One of the fundamental arguments of bussed education is the assumption that it is impossible to provide quality education in multigrade classrooms. However, as mentioned earlier, with well-trained teachers and the right structuring, multigrade classrooms can be transformed into a viable educational model where children can receive an education within their own communities while achieving at least the same level of academic success as those in transported education. In this way, rural schools can become learning environments where rural communities develop strong ties with education, contributing not only to academic progress but also to social and cultural development.

¹¹ Yılmaz, C. (2019). Intermediary, communicative, and facilitating factors influencing rural-to-urban migration in Türkiye. In S. Ü. Erbilin & G. Şahin (Eds.), Human and economic geography studies: Tribute to Prof. Dr. Nuran Taşlıgil (pp. 125-134). Eski Babil Yayınları.

